Kino no Tabi Volume9

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These are the novel illustrations that were included in volume 9

キノの旅IX

the Beautiful World

空には、暖かい午後の太陽が浮かんでいました。なだらかで大きな丘を登った時、丘の向こうが見えた時、キノは驚きの声を出しました。「あれ？　なんでだろう」急ブレーキをかけられて止まったエルメスも、「おや」やっぱり驚きました。そこには国がありました。広い草原に、城壁が見えました。白い城壁が、大きな円を描いていました。——キノとエルメスが辿り着いたのは、城壁が続く大きな国。そこに国があるとは聞いていなかったので驚きつつ、入国するための門を探して走り続ける。しかし……。(『城壁の話』)他、全15話収録。

＊＊＊＊＊以下、時雨沢より＊＊＊＊＊
オビを外してここまで読んでくださったあなたに時雨沢が特別にお教えします。この本の「あとがき」は——この裏にもあります。それ本当です。さあめくりましょう。めくるめくあとがきの世界へ。

sweet home
traveler
Running
his road
innocence
guilty
history
what it
tes

キノの旅IX

—the Beautiful World—

時雨沢恵一
KEIICHI SIGSAWA

イラスト●黒星紅白
ILLUSTRATION KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI

電撃文庫

し-8-15

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時雨沢恵一
電撃文庫
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背伸びする筆者

時雨沢恵一（しぐさわけいいち）

この夏、北海道ツーリングに行きました。楽しかったです。デビュー以来今年こそ行くぞと早五年。一つの目的を達成しました。次の目標は、バイクで月に行くことです。待ってろよ兎。食べてやるぜ餅。ひとつ問題は、月までの地図がどこにも売っていないこと。

【電撃文庫作品】

キノの旅 the Beautiful World
キノの旅Ⅱ～Ⅸ the Beautiful World
アリソン
アリソンⅡ 真昼の夜の夢
アリソンⅢ〈上〉 ルトニを車窓から
アリソンⅢ〈下〉 陰謀という名の列車
リリアとトレイズⅠ そして二人は旅行に行った〈上〉
リリアとトレイズⅡ そして二人は旅行に行った〈下〉

イラスト：黒星紅白（くろほしこうはく）

福岡在住猫好きイラストレーター。飯塚武史名義でプレイステーション2「サモンナイト」シリーズキャラクターデザインを手がけてます。今年の目標は発売日に買ったゲームを廉価版が出る前にクリアする事。

カバー／旭印刷

キノの旅 IX

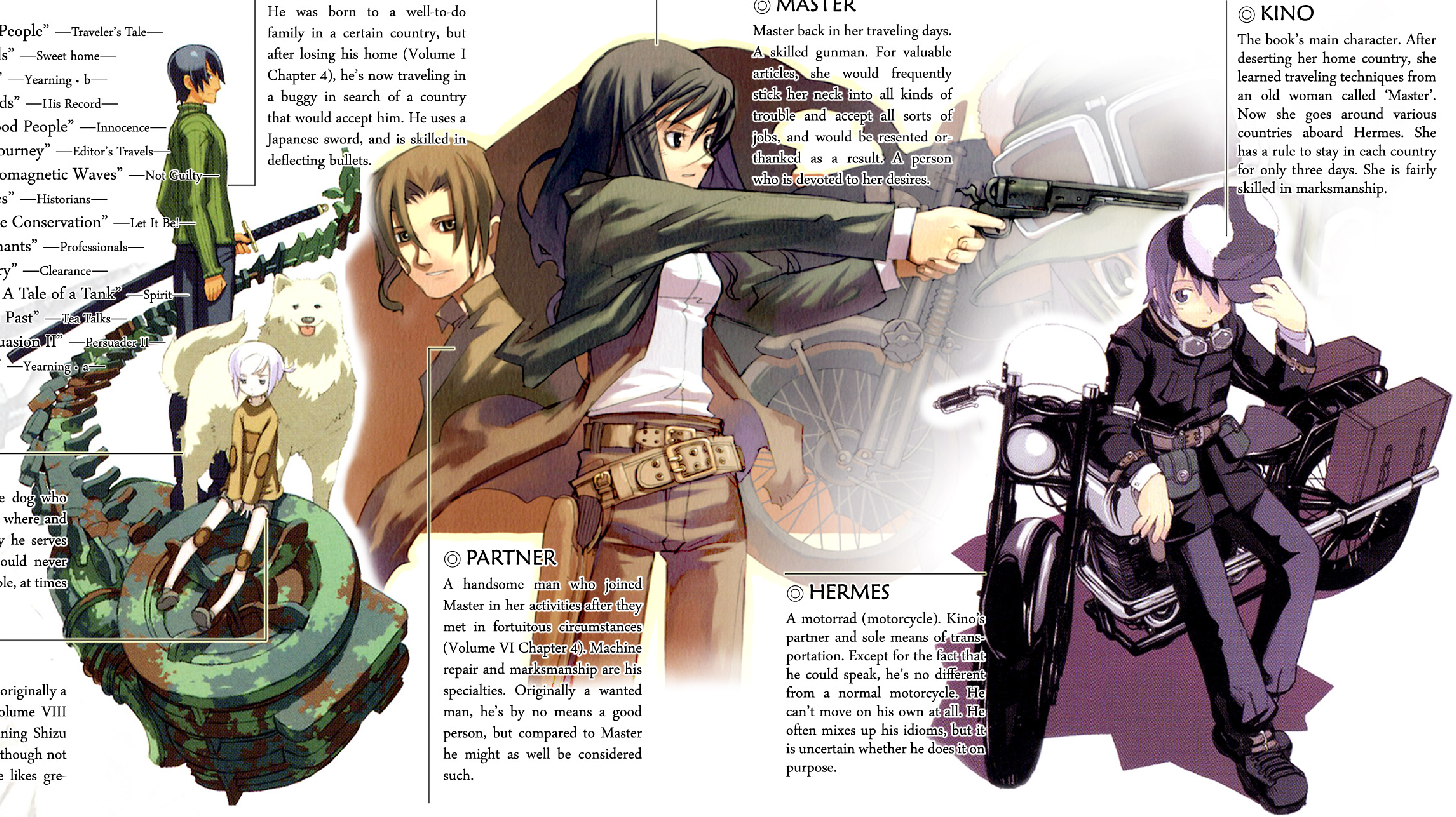
——— the Beautiful World ———

時雨沢 恵一
KEIICHI SIGSAWA

イラスト●黒星紅白
ILLUSTRATION KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI

C O N T E N T S

Frontispiece “Unacceptable People” —Traveler’s Tale—
Frontispiece “A Tale of Walls” —Sweet home—
Prologue “In Sorrow • b” —Yearning • b—
Chapter 1 “Land of Records” —His Record—
Chapter 2 “Evening of Good People” —Innocence—
Chapter 3 “An Author’s Journey” —Editor’s Travels—
Chapter 4 “Land of Electromagnetic Waves” —Not Guilty—
Chapter 5 “Land of Diaries” —Historians—
Chapter 6 “Land of Nature Conservation” —Let It Be!—
Chapter 7 “Land of Merchants” —Professionals—
Chapter 8 “Killing Country” —Clearance—
Chapter 9 “Continuation: A Tale of a Tank” —Spirit—
Chapter 10 “Tales from the Past” —Tea Talks—
Chapter 11 “Power of Persuasion II” —Persuader II—
Epilogue “In Sorrow • a” —Yearning • a—



◎ SHIZU

He was born to a well-to-do family in a certain country, but after losing his home (Volume I Chapter 4), he’s now traveling in a buggy in search of a country that would accept him. He uses a Japanese sword, and is skilled in deflecting bullets.

◎ RIKU

Shizu’s servant, a big white dog who can talk. It is still unknown where and how he met Shizu and why he serves him. A faithful dog who could never abandon his at times miserable, at times bewildered Master.

◎ TI (TIFANA)

A white-haired girl who was originally a resident of one country (Volume VIII Epilogue), but ended up joining Shizu and Riku. A very silent girl, though not mute. For some reason, she likes grenades.

◎ PARTNER

A handsome man who joined Master in her activities after they met in fortuitous circumstances (Volume VI Chapter 4). Machine repair and marksmanship are his specialties. Originally a wanted man, he’s by no means a good person, but compared to Master he might as well be considered such.

◎ MASTER

Master back in her traveling days. A skilled gunman. For valuable articles, she would frequently stick her neck into all kinds of trouble and accept all sorts of jobs, and would be resented or thanked as a result. A person who is devoted to her desires.

◎ HERMES

A motorrad (motorcycle). Kino’s partner and sole means of transportation. Except for the fact that he could speak, he’s no different from a normal motorcycle. He can’t move on his own at all. He often mixes up his idioms, but it is uncertain whether he does it on purpose.

◎ KINO

The book’s main character. After deserting her home country, she learned traveling techniques from an old woman called ‘Master’. Now she goes around various countries aboard Hermes. She has a rule to stay in each country for only three days. She is fairly skilled in marksmanship.

That sorrow of yours will eventually be you

— Do You Love You? —

Under the Cover

“AfterKino”

“Kino! Kino! Wake up! Kino!”

“Mm? Huh? What do you want Hermes…? Just when I took the trouble to take a nap under the sunlight filtering through the leaves…”

“As if you liked hammocks that much!”

“I *love* them. It’s especially cool and comfortable to the back during summer.”

“Then just go and sleep on a hammock forever!”

“All right. **Yawn*…I’m off to bed.”

“Wait! We don’t have time for that! It’s an afterword!”

“Afterword…? Isn’t there supposed to be one at the end of the book?”

“There’s also one over here! So if we don’t go and say something, the underside of the cover will be blank.”

“The underside of the cover is supposed to be blank.”

“That kind of thinking is not popular in *Dengeki Bunko*, baby.”

“Who? —Anyway, in the first place, this author…”

“Typically screws around with his afterword, yup. But alas, it seems that the author decided that he’d ‘like to write a perfectly normal and serious afterword once in a while.’”

“… He’s screwing with us, isn’t he?”

“Yup. And I think he wants us to take it seriously.”

“And as a result, we were driven into this kind of place.”

“Exactly. That’s why you’ve got to say something, Kino.”

“Okay. But I’ll sleep first.”

“Su— wait, don’t sleep! There’s still several frames left !”

“You say something, Hermes. Good luck… *Zzz*”

“You’re really asking for it… Well then dear readers, shall we talk about the time when Kino swam stark naked and uttered strange noises as her body was caressed by swarms of fish?”

“Wha—! Wait! Hold it right there, Hermes!”

“Ah, awake at last. Now then, *‘Once, we found a clear stream in a forest…”*

“Wait! They’ll know if you tell them! They’ll find out!”

“There’s no use arguing about it now. *‘Since there was nobody, she stripped down, underwear and all…”*

“Gah! I’ll s-shoot! I’ll shoot you if you don’t stop!”

“Killing me means killing your freedom. *‘And jumped in…”*

“I’ll only fire a warning shot! —Bang! Rat-tat-tat!”

“Hermes barrier! All of them got deflected. *‘While she bathed, she suddenly uttered a weird ‘Aha~!’”*

"'Earth Destroyer Bomb!' With this, it'll only take one shot!"

"It's futile. I can see through all your moves. *'So I asked her, 'What's wrong?' But she only giggled—'Kya! It tickles!' —and ignored me…"*

"Hermes! Now you ignited the fuse of my wrath! And for that sin, you'll have to die!"

"Your threats are useless. And to continue—"

"Kino punch! One-two!"

"Ow, ow! I was hit! Hermes Kick!"

"Uh no, that's not possible."

"It's the passion, you know, passion!"

"Ah I see…passion, huh. —Argh, now you've done it, I'm giving that back twice! Kino chop! Bam bam bam!"

"Ow ow ow ow ow ow ow ow ow"

"Kino blinder! Kino elbow! Kino uppercut!"

“Ow ow, whack, kapow, kabam!”

“Kino flare! Kino blast!”

“If you don’t stop this Kino, you’ll be walking from here on.”

“Hmph. Using my weakness against me, huh. You coward!”

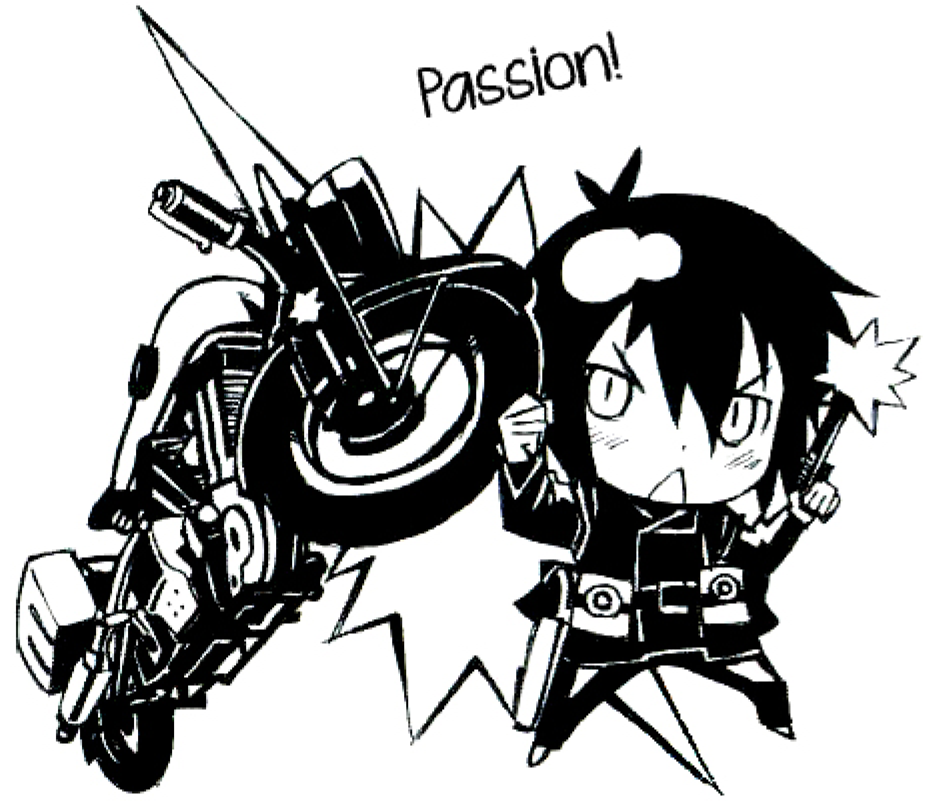
“Ah, we’ve filled the page. The end, the end.”

“Eh? It’s already over? —What’s the catch?”

“Catch? —That’s for the readers to decide.”

“I see. I’ll go back to sleep then.”

“Sure, sweet dreams.”


Passion!

“AfterShizu”

“Master Shizu.”

“What is it, Riku? I’m not a ****phile, you know.”

“No one said you were. This is the afterword.”

“Ah, I see. I’m not a stalker either.”

“Of course you’re not, Master Shizu!”

“Y-you know… Looking for a country is getting troublesome… Maybe I should put up some fences over there, make my own country, and toge—”

“Who are you?!”

“Do you know, Riku?”

“What is it?”

“In the original manuscript of ‘Kino no Tabi’, we weren’t actually supposed to appear in the Coliseum chapter. But as the writing progressed, it hit the author casually one day while he was shopping in front of Fujisawa station, and wrote in a memopad he just bought in Yurindo: ‘The son will make an appearance. He’ll have a partner called Riku,’ And so we were born.”

“Oh, the secret story of our birth that no one knows of, eh? How wonderful!”

“If we weren’t brought forth unto this world back then …we need not have to live this existence beset with torment. How melancho—“

“Who are you?!”

“Do you know, Riku?”

“What is it?”

“Once, the author met up with Mr. Kouhaku Kuroboshi in a big event that I will not name, and requested, ‘Make Shizu wear glasses in the next volume’. And it seems like Mr. Kuroboshi was all for it.”

“Ooh! So Master Shizu will have an appearance with glasses soon?”

“But without a thought, the author wrote a story with Kino wearing glasses in the eighth volume. Mr. Kuroboshi also drew gorgeous pictures for it…”

“Ah… Now that you mention it.”

“And thus, the chance for me to appear first as a meganekko[1] was forever lost…”

“Please don’t lose hope… Wait, you’re not a girl.”

“Ah, heaven has forsaken us!”

“That’s a bit of an exaggeration… ‘Us?’ Am I supposed to wear them too, Master Shizu? The glasses, I mean.”

“Na-nana-nana-naa! Dog with eyeglasses!”

“Ga— Ehem. Since, I’m a smart dog, I’ll restrain myself. By the way, the column above us seems quite busy.”

“Just some rats, probably. ——And so, the only road left for me is the ‘magical girl debut’…”

“Master Shizu… please don’t be disheartened. Come, let’s go to the hospital together.”

“It’s not yet out. The plans are for the month after next.”

“Come, you’re seriously ill. Master Shizu, you’re tired.”

“Hey Shizu, Riku! What are you doing, wasting your time whimpering in this kind of place? Pull yourselves together!”

“Hmm? Who?”

“W-who is it?”

“It’s me, Ti! Don’t you dare tell me you have forgotten this white hair, green eyes, and hand grenade!”

“Oh, it’s just you, Ti…”

“You were here?”

“I’ve been here from the start! But if I replied with ‘…’ all the time it’ll fill up too much space! You better thank me for being considerate, you foolish samurai and useless dog.”

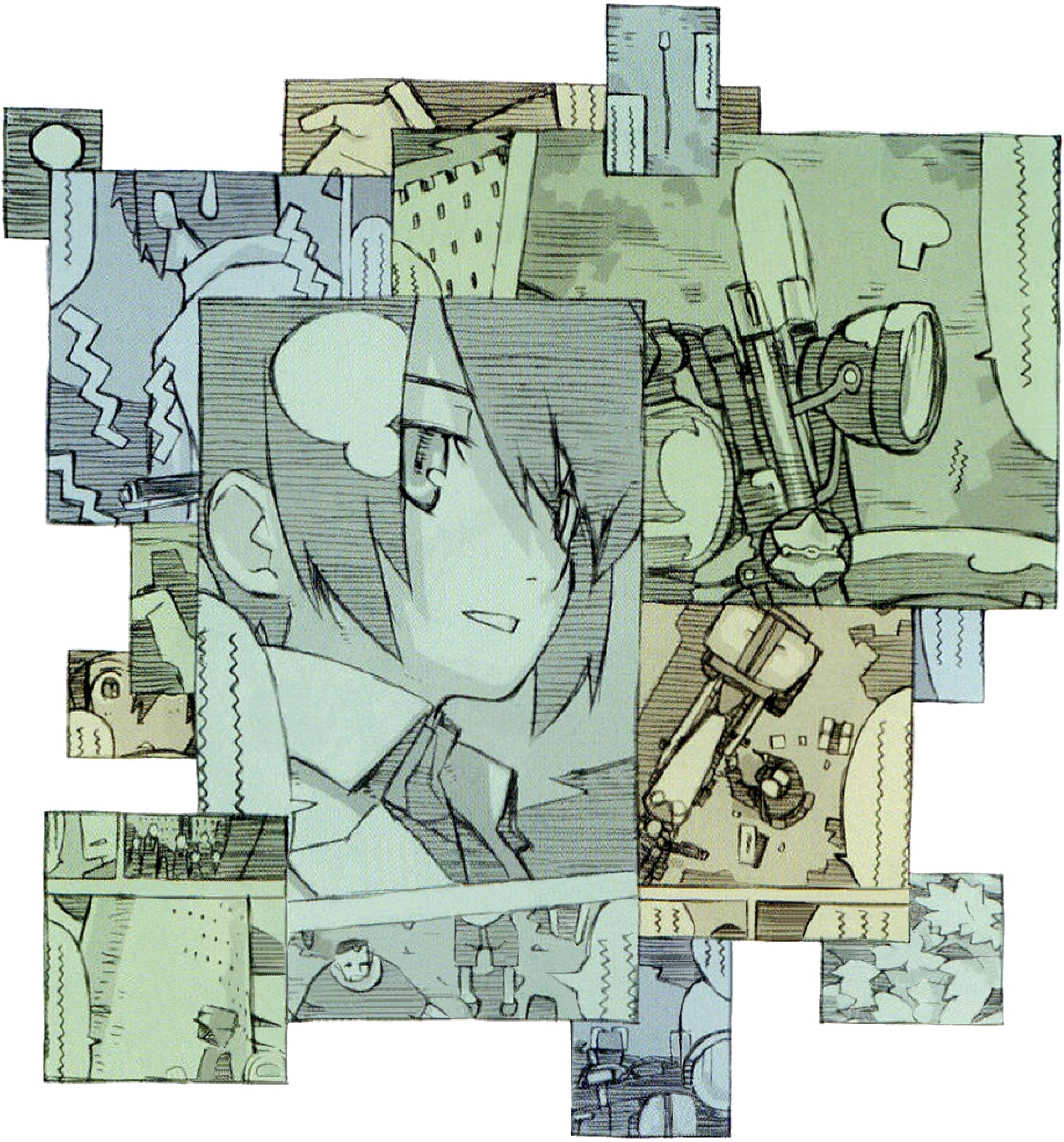
“Foolish samurai? How mean.”

“A u-useless dog, me?”

“I’m just saying the truth! Hey, it’s time for the main text! Straighten up you good-for-nothing guy and stupid dog! Move it!—This column’s over!”

Foolish Samurai!
Useless Dog!

“Unacceptable People” —Traveler’s Tale—



Frontispiece

“Unacceptable People”

— Traveler’s Tale —

In a certain country.

At a restaurant Kino and Hermes were talking to a man sitting next to them.

The man asked about their journey and Kino honestly told him.

Then the man said in a slightly angry tone:

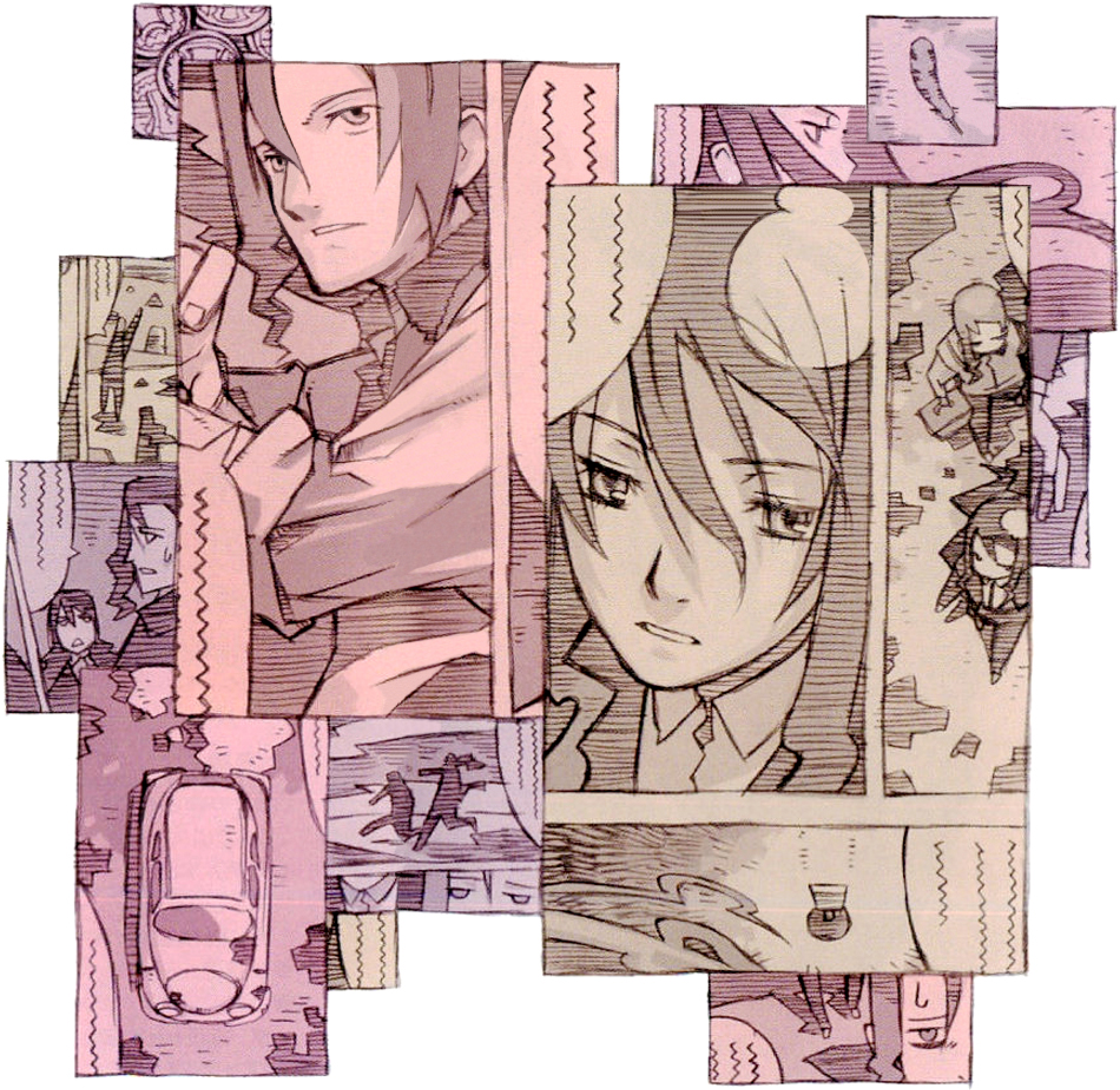
“So you are just aimlessly wandering from one country to another? This is wrong. That’s not a real journey. —That’s unacceptable. It just makes no sense.”

“Okay, you’ve made your point.”

Said Kino sipping her tea, and then asked:

“By the way, how was your journey?”

—



In a certain country.

At a restaurant Master and her partner, a short but good-looking man, were talking to a man sitting next to them.

The man asked about their journey and Master honestly told him.

Then the man said in a slightly angry tone:

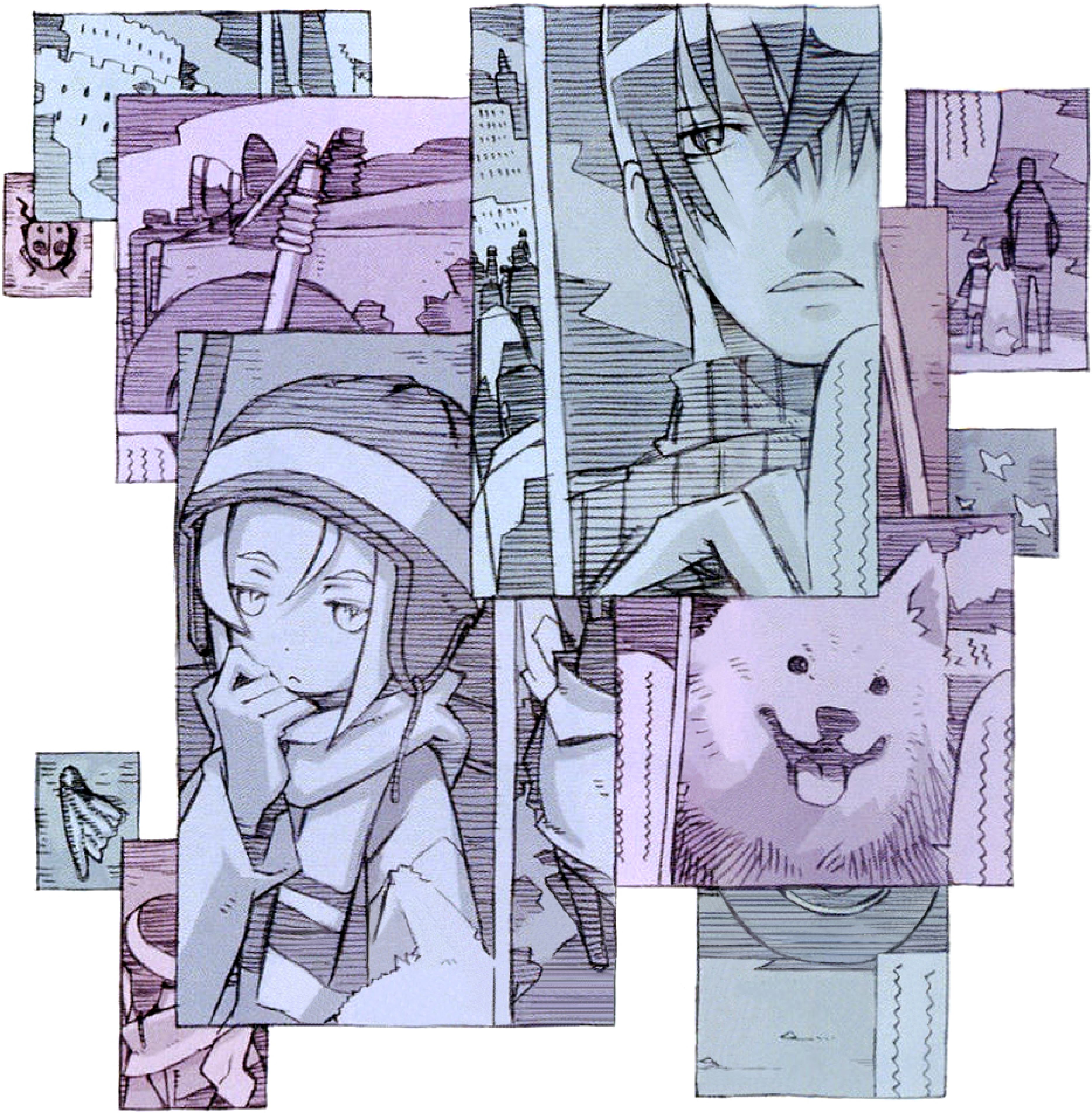
“So you’re just making money doing whatever pleases you? This is wrong. That’s not a real journey. —That’s unacceptable. It just makes no sense.”

“Okay, you’ve made your point.”

Said Master sipping her tea, and then asked:

“By the way, how was your journey?”

—



In a certain country.

At a restaurant Shizu, Ti and Riku were talking to a man sitting next to them.

The man asked about their journey and Shizu honestly told him.

Then the man said in a slightly angry tone:

“So you are just looking for a permanent home? This is wrong. That’s not a real journey. —That’s unacceptable. It just makes no sense.”

“Okay, you’ve made your point.”

Said Shizu sipping his tea, and then asked:

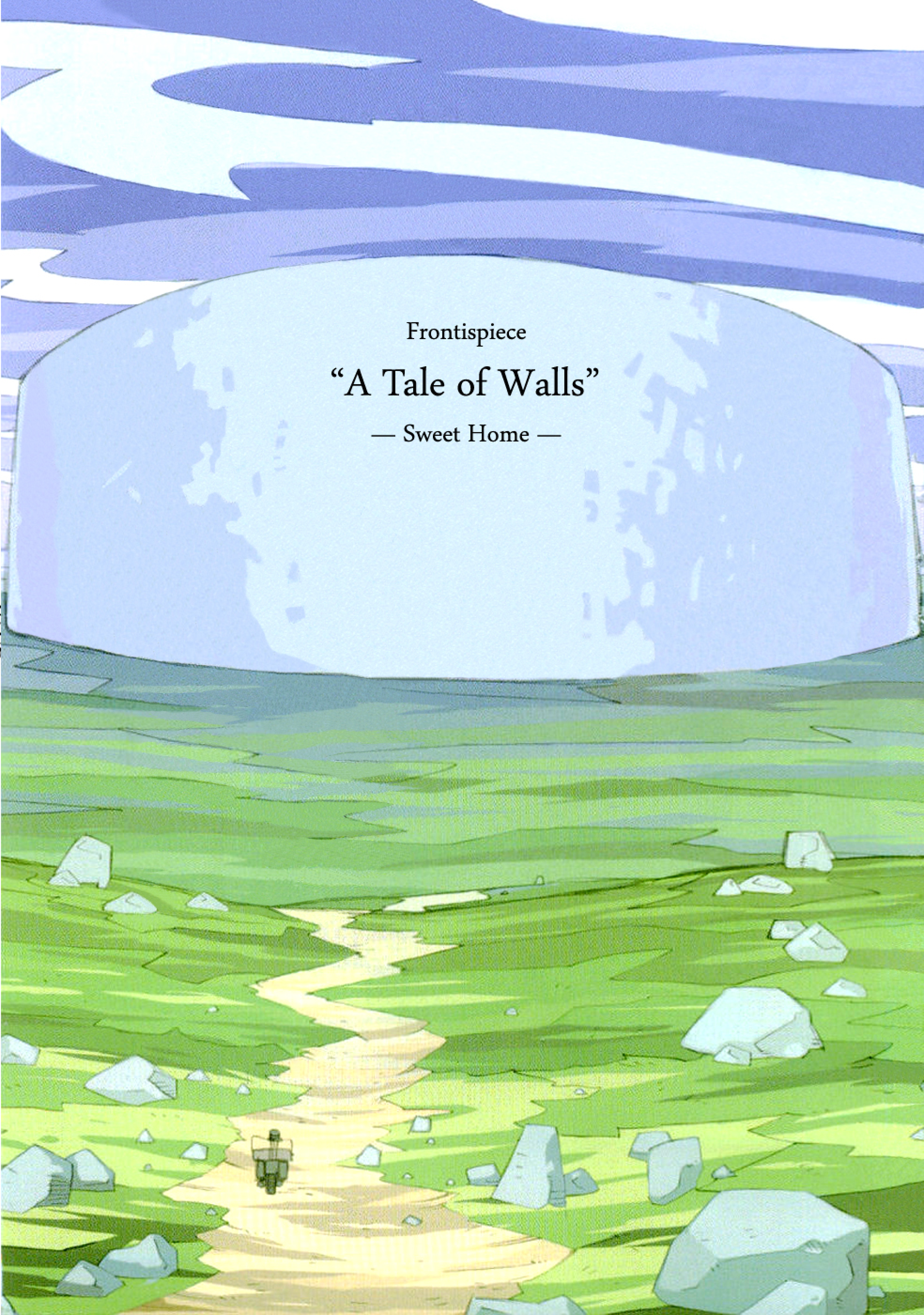
“By the way, how was your journey?”

—

The man’s answer was the same every time:

“I haven’t started my journey yet. I’m about to.”

“A Tale of Walls” —Sweet Home—



Frontispiece

“A Tale of Walls”

— Sweet Home —

Kino and Hermes were running through a grassy plain .

The warm afternoon sun was floating in the sky.

When they ascended a big gently sloping hill and looked at the opposite side, Kino exclaimed in surprise,

“Wh-what is it…?”

“Wow.”

Hermes, who was suddenly stopped, was also startled.

There was a country. Its walls describing a circle were spreading across the wide plain. Due to the height of the walls, the inside of the country couldn’t be seen at all.

“Have you heard anything about this country, Kino?”

“No, Hermes, I don’t know anything about it. I was told that this plain could be used to make a shortcut, but no one told me about a country. We were supposed to arrive to the next country in three days.”

“Then what is *it*?

“What can it be…?”

Kino started the engine and ran Hermes towards the wall.

The wall was extremely high.

It was three times higher than any ordinary wall. If one stands right beside it and looks up, he won’t be able to see its top.

Kino approached the towering wall and looked around. A gate wasn’t visible at either side of the white flat wall.

“I wonder where the gate is.”

“The only way to find out is to search for it.”

Kino started the engine and began moving along the wall, keeping it to the left.

They were running.

And running.

However there was no gate. Just the white wall in front of them and behind.

“Kino, what if the gate was just around the corner, if we started moving clockwise instead?”

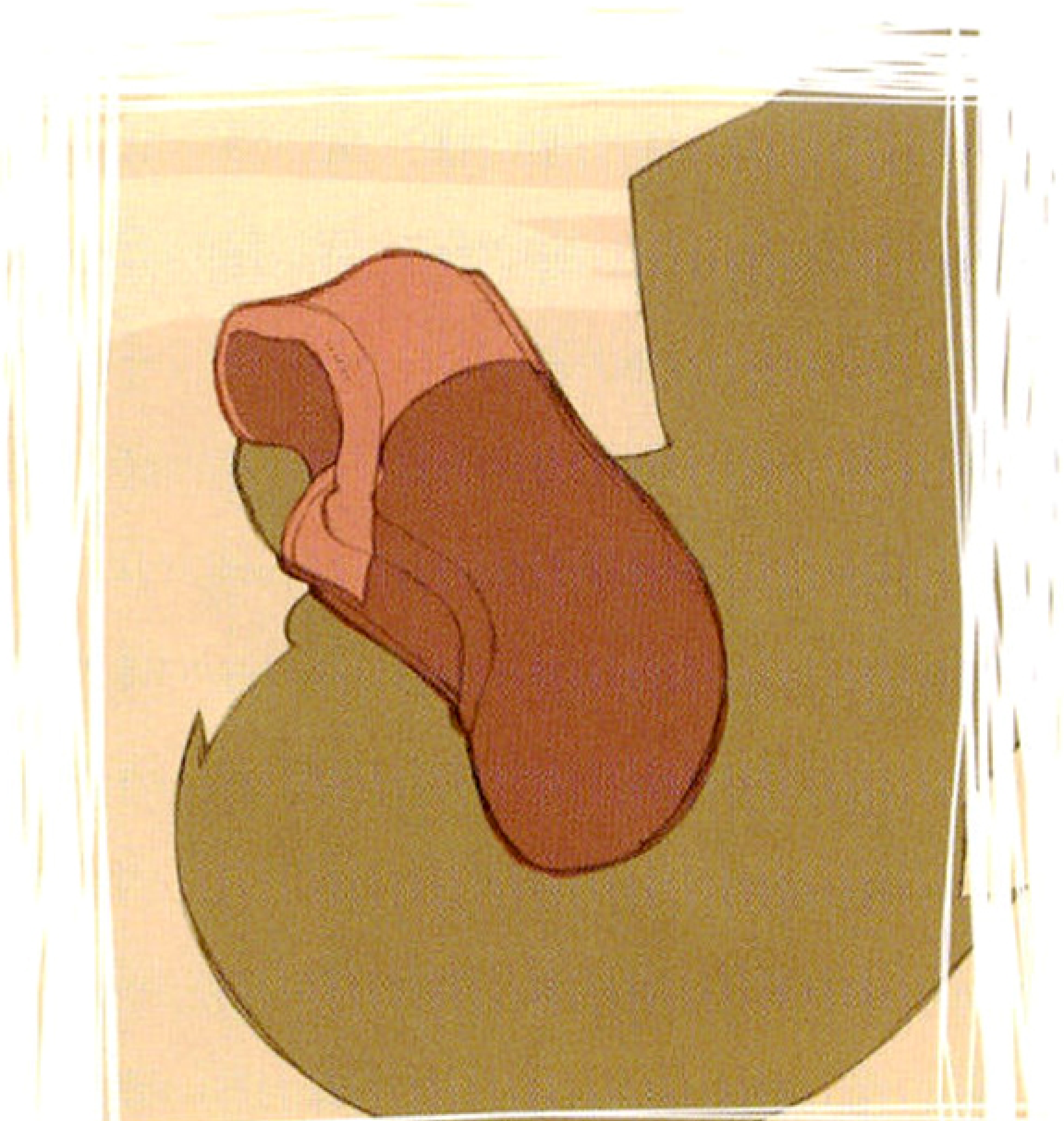
“That might be true,” said Kino, but kept moving in the same direction.

“Kino, stop for a moment.”

Hermes said. Kino slammed on the brakes.

A shoe fell down right beside Hermes’ wheel.

It was a small red shoe.



Just the right one. It was lying alone on the ground.

It wasn’t dirty, but a clean one.

“A shoe. What the?”

“A shoe. What the heck?”

Kino and Hermes conversed, but there was no answer.

Leaving this shoe behind, Kino started the engine.

“I can’t see it.”

“How can this be, Hermes?”

No matter how long they ran, there was no entrance.

Then suddenly.

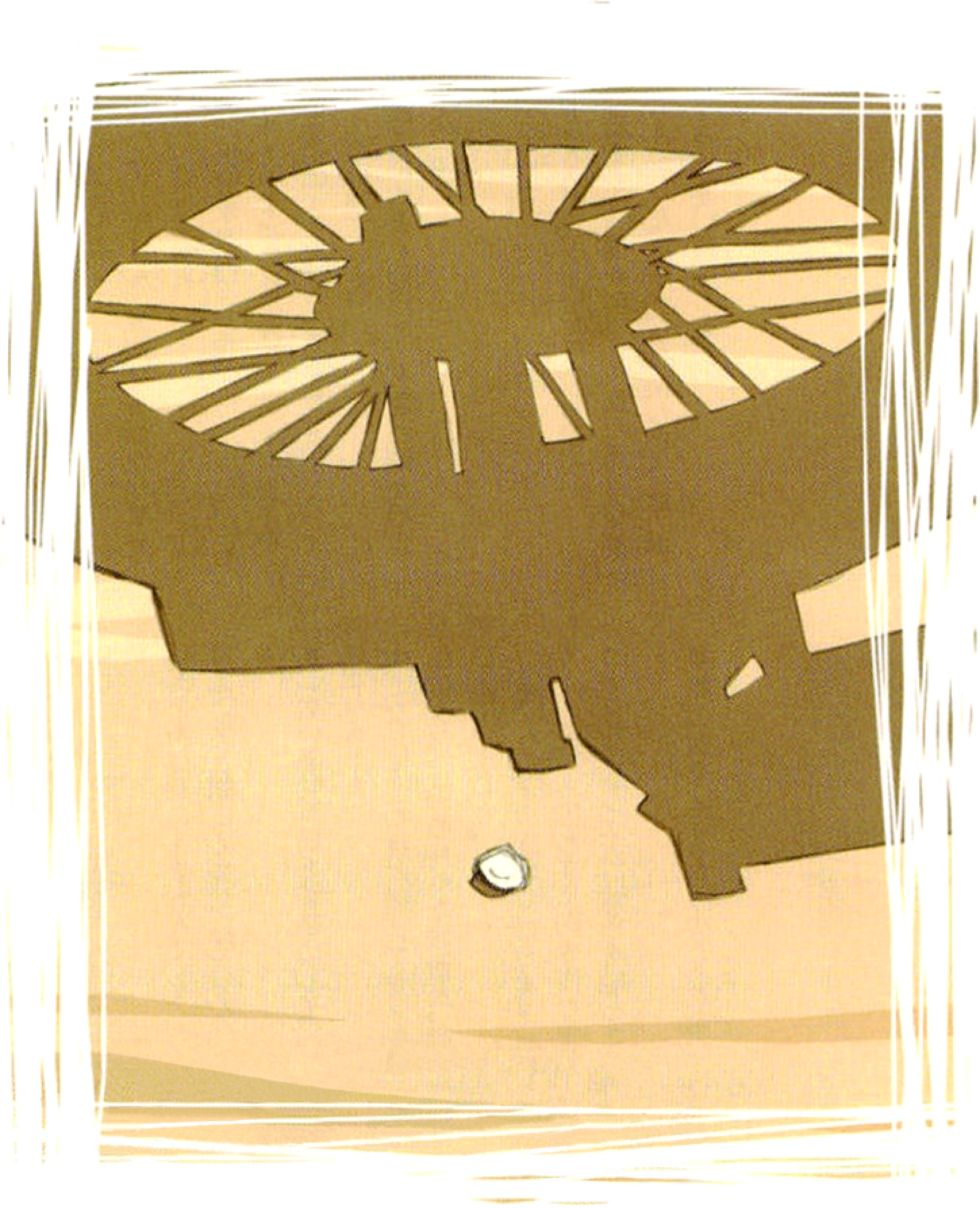
“Oh.”

Bump.

“Ouch.”

Kino was taken aback, the dry sound was heard, and Hermes let out an exclamation.

A small stone fell from above. It whizzed past the tip of Kino’s nose, hit Hermes’ tank, bounced off it and landed on the ground.



Kino stopped Hermes, turned around and looked upward.

She was looking upward.

However, there was nothing but the tall wall.

There was just the tall wall.

“We’ll make full circle pretty soon.”

“Seems like it.”

Said Kino and Hermes. However they kept moving.

The gate was nowhere to be found. The gate was nowhere to be found. The gate was nowhere to be found.

They didn’t find the gate.

Kino and Hermes stopped when they stumbled upon tire tracks. These were Hermes’ tire tracks.

The sun was leaning to the west. The evening was drawing in.

“We’ve made a full circle.”

“Yeah.”

Murmured Kino and Hermes.

At that moment—subtly, faintly, tenderly—a joyful voice was heard. Someone’s joyful, really joyful voice was heard.

“Did you hear it?”

“I did.”

“Do you hear it now?”

“Not anymore.”

Kino and Hermes stayed there for a while—

But they didn’t hear the voice anymore.

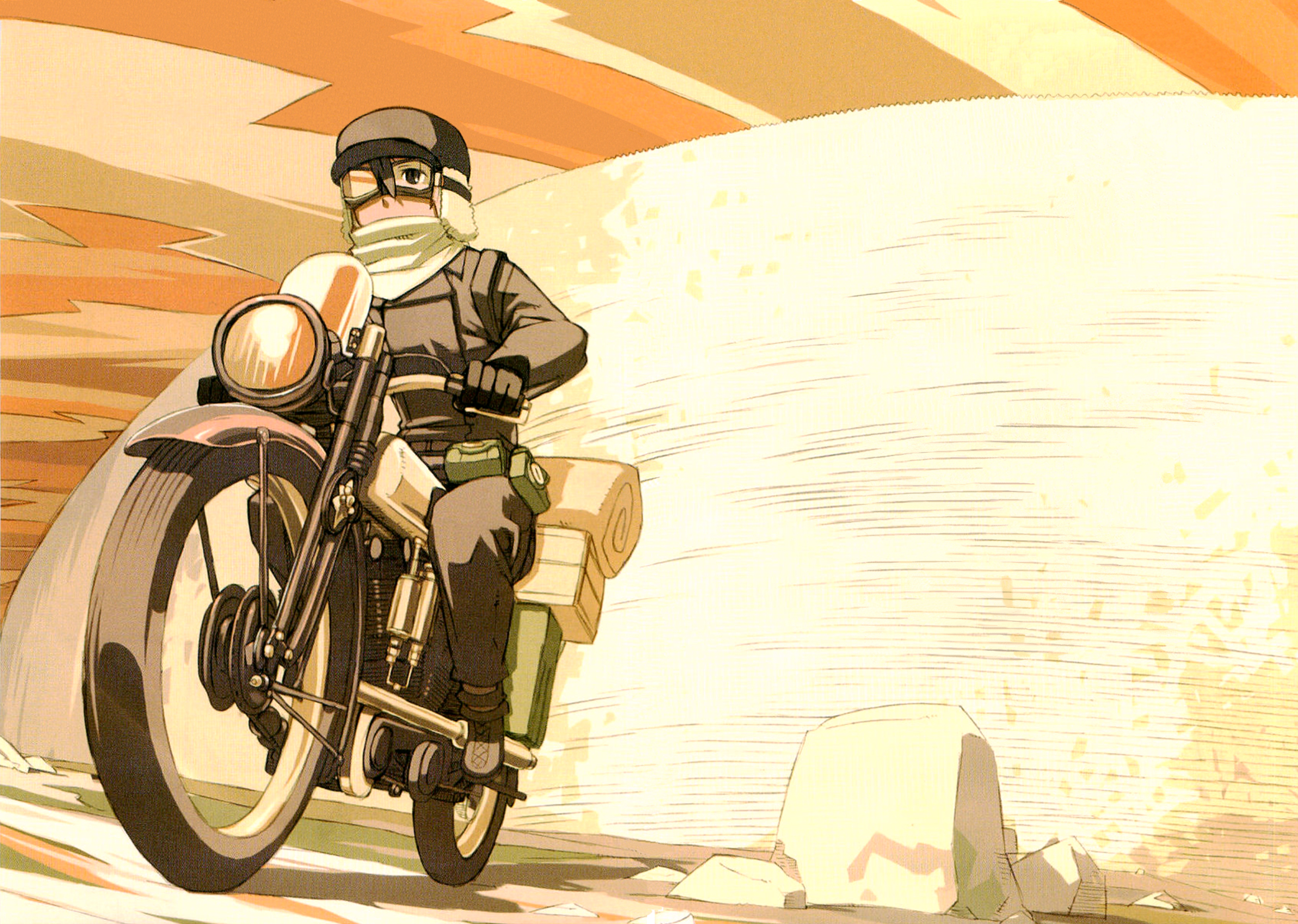
They didn’t hear the voice anymore.

Kino and Hermes were running, leaving the extremely tall walls behind their backs.

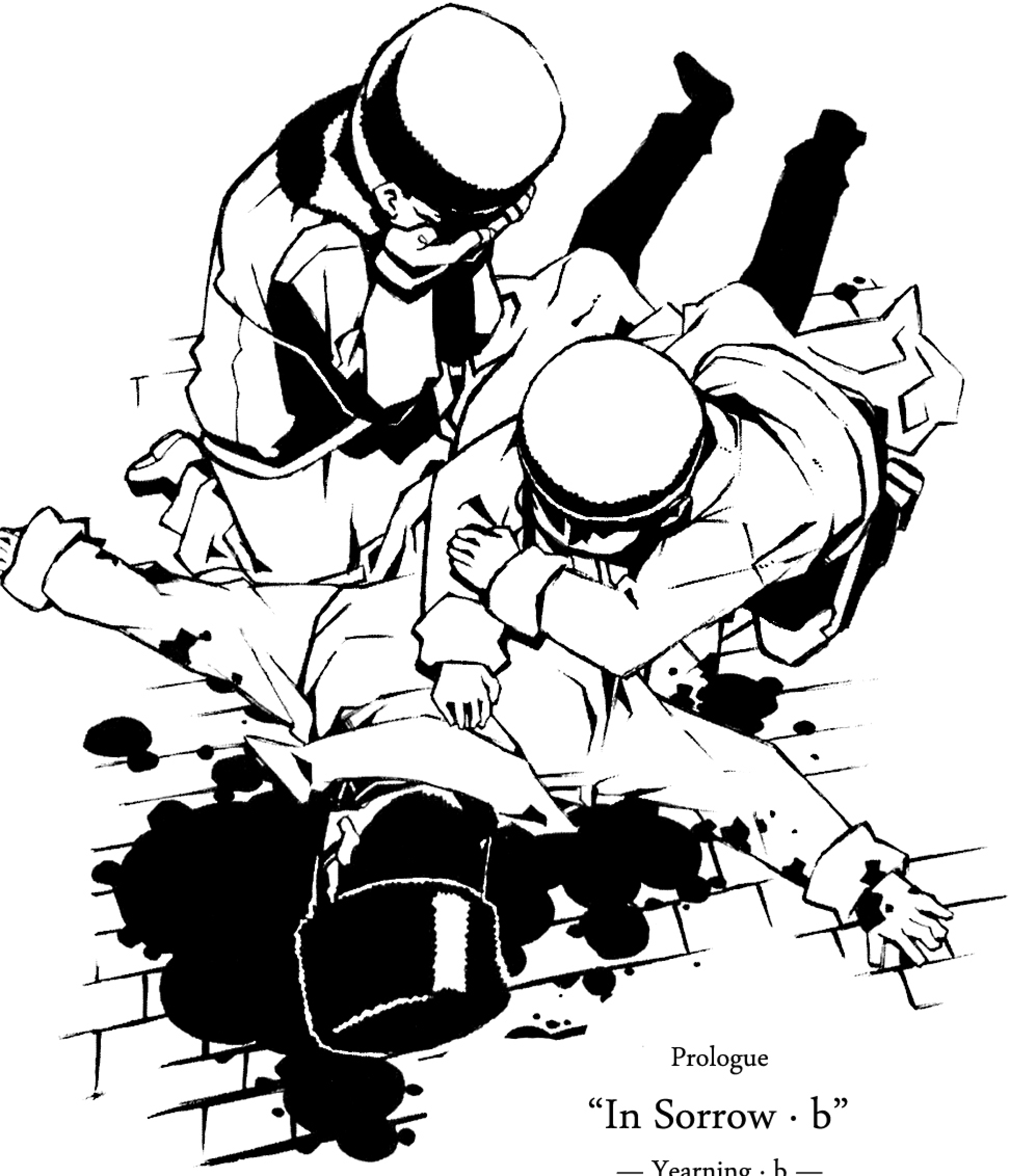
After crossing two hills, Kino looked back. The walls, dyed crimson red by the setting sun, were gracefully rising to the sky.

She looked at it through her goggles, and then silently turned around. Her goggles reflected the crimson red glare.

Kino and Hermes were running through the grassy plain.



“In Sorrow · b” —Yearning · b—



Prologue

“In Sorrow · b”

— Yearning · b —

And then the man died.

In a corner of the square where several streets converge, the man lying face down stopped moving while his blood was soaking into the stone pavement.

Under the cloudy sky that forebodes snow, and in the cold air, the blood was emitting thin steam that was immediately disappearing.

“…”

Kino, who was wearing a coat with a turned-up collar, mixed with the crowd and watched from the distance.

Shortly, two people came out of the crowd pushing their way through. Probably his acquaintances, a young lady and an aged one, approached the dead man and leaned over his body.

They shook his body several times and called him by name, however they finally had no choice but to accept his death. After that they burst into tears.

The crowd was silent. Everyone took off their hats, placed it upon their chests and closed their eyes.

“What a pitiful sight. Let’s pray for his soul.”

“…”

Kino watched silently as they prayed for the repose of dead man’s soul.

“Hey, traveler— This is a ‘sorrowful country’, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, definitely.”

Answered Kino.

“Land of Records” —His Record—

Chapter One

“Land of Records”

— His Record —

The spring meadow was bursting with color.

The ground was multicolored from many different kinds of flowers blooming at the same time; it was as if a rainbow descended from the sky and glued itself on the ground. The bed of flowers stretched out beyond the horizon was being illuminated by the gentle rays of the noon sun. A single hue dominated one area were flowers of the same color were grouped together, while in another place, a diverse range of flower colors were mixed together, giving birth to an entirely new hue.

A motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly) was running slowly on a single road dividing the flower meadow. It leisurely rode through the damp, dark brown road, the sound coming from its exhaust held back.

It was a luggage-laden motorrad. Boxes were attached on both sides of its back seat, and there was a bag on top of the carrier.

Its rider was wearing a brown coat, the collar of which was opened to allow the warm air in. Its long, excess hem was wrapped up to her thighs. She was wearing a brimmed hat with flaps covering the ears, and strapped around it was a pair of silver-framed goggles that was already peeled off in places. She was around her mid-teens, with short, black hair and a fearless expression on her face.

“It’s such a beautiful place. Really,” the rider shared her impressions with a cheerful tone while riding the motorrad.

“I agree. This is a nice place,” answered the motorrad.

“Spring is so great, isn’t it? Mornings and evenings are still cold, but when riding in the daytime, the coolness of the air doesn’t freeze you over. It’s really painful when your fingers are freezing. When it’s warm, I can ride absentmindedly.”

“Hmm. Well, how many springs have you seen Kino? Fifteen? Thirty? Or maybe, 300?”

The rider called Kino answered with a laugh, “Was it that long already? I’ve already forgotten. What about you , Hermes?”

“I don’t remember,” the motorrad called Hermes replied jokingly.

“I guessed as much,” Kino replied with a look of comprehension.

“Hmm? Why?”

“Well, Hermes— Ah, I see it.”

Underneath the horizon ahead of them, the gray-colored walls slowly came into view from the middle of the flower fields.

“Say, that country must be wonderful to suit a place as wonderful as this. I wonder if it’s a good country?”

“What is a ‘good country’ to you, Kino?” Hermes asked, paying no heed to the change in topic.

Kino answered immediately, “The food is delicious and cheap. Inns with showers are cheap. —And if possible, both are *free*.”

“Something like that out of the blue…”

“What about you, Hermes?”

“Fuel, parts, and service costs are cheap. And if possible, entirely *free!*”

“I knew it. —But it’s not like we can come across such a convenient country so easily… Well, it’s fine as long as it doesn’t overcharge.”

“I guess so. More than that, pray that there’s a skilled mechanic over there.”

“Now then, what kind of country will it be like?”

“I’m looking forward to it,” Hermes said.

Kino nodded. “Me too.”

And then she accelerated.

—

“—How much the food is? Well, since you’re a traveler, we can’t accept any money from you. In the first place, all basic food necessities are distributed in this country.”

“—Price of the fuel? Everything’s being distributed, you see. If we receive any money, we’ll get an earful from our boss.”

“—Payment for motorrad service? It’s not like there’s no fee, but since the technology is so advanced in this country, basic fine-tuning is as easy as changing a light bulb.”

“—The cost for this inn? Traveler, you are a guest so we can’t take any money from you. Please enjoy your stay. It’s just for three days, but to tell you the truth, it doesn’t make any difference whether you stay for one or two months.”

“—Replenishing your travel supplies? If there’s anything you need, just grab anything you want. No need to hold back.”

The evening of the second day since they entered the country.

“What a great place!”

“What a great place!”

Kino and Hermes mused while in the park at the country center.

Tied with a rubber string on Hermes’ carrier was a box of goods Kino was able to get for free. The box contained portable rations, persuader (Note: A gun) bullets, liquid gunpowder, and a bag of new underwear.

The black-jacketed Kino was sitting on a bench beside Hermes. A revolver-type hand persuader was suspended from her right thigh. A vivid flower field, similar to the ones outside the country, could be seen inside the spacious park.

“Kino, what they call ‘heaven’ should be a place like this. I’m sure of it.”

“Then that means the people here are heaven dwellers even though they’re still alive…? Indeed, everyone have bright faces, as if they live their lives in happiness from the bottom of their hearts… It’s the first time I’ve seen such a country.”

“Isn’t that great?”

“Yeah, but if that’s the case—”

“Yeah?”

“If the people in this place die, where do they go?”

Hermes replied coldly to Kino’s question. “Who knows? Anyway, do you really believe that there is such a thing as heaven, Kino?”

“…”

Kino fell silent. And then, a warm wind blew and shook her hair. Amidst this warm and snug atmosphere, Kino replied, “Well, it doesn’t really matter.”

“I guess so.”

—

After a while,

“In the restaurant we’re in earlier, I asked a person why this country can afford to be so generous—” Kino started.

“Oh, and?”

“It was because they’re rich. Be it grains, meat, or fish, this country was abundant with food resources, so there’s no way the citizens would starve. Moreover, the progress in technology and medicine are used for the happiness of the people. Besides that, they strictly regulate their population so that it wouldn’t increase any more than necessary, so it seems like they can continue living in abundance and peace for several hundred years more,” Kino said in a yearning tone, with a hint of jealousy, while leaning on the back seat of a bench and looking up at the sky.

“This place is heaven, no doubt.”

“Sure is…,” Kino muttered, shut her eyes and fell silent.

Hermes suddenly spoke dramatically, “‘And with that, lazybones Kino couldn’t find it in herself to leave this laid-back country. Therefore, Kino’s journey ends here. And she lived happily ever after—’”

Kino opened her eyes and lowered her face. “Don’t decide just like that, Hermes. I have no intention to stop just yet.”

“But you know Kino, if you stay here, you’ll never have to go hungry until you die.”

In reply to Hermes’ words, Kino muttered with a serious expression, “You have a point… And so I’ll dispose of the useless Hermes, and borrow a small room …”

“‘—was what I thought, but Kino did not end her journey. To be continued!’”

The next day, the morning of the third day since they entered the country. Kino woke up at dawn as usual.

While being bathed by the morning glow flowing in through the wide windows, Kino practiced her quick draw with the revolver she called ‘Canon’. Afterwards, she did a thorough maintenance, inserted bullets inside, then returned it to her holster.

Kino spent a long time in the shower, as if she was reluctant to part with it, and then ate the large serving of breakfast carried to her room.

Kino laid out her luggage on top of the room’s carpet, checking in detail the number and condition of each item. Then she let out words of thanks to her old underwear, and left them outside the bag after folding them up carefully.

After she has loaded the bag on Hermes and firmly fixed it up with strings, “Now then…,” Kino muttered words with hidden determination and took one big breath. And then,

“Wake up!”

While yelling, Kino pounded on Hermes’ seat with both fists.

She pounded.

And pounded for a while.

And pounded stronger.

“Aren’t we leaving yet? It’s already the third day.”

“Let’s leave at the last minute.”

“Whatever.”

“It’s heaven, after all.”

“Whatever.”

The jacket-clad Kino and the luggage-laden Hermes were in the same park as the previous day. It turned into a café, with chairs and tables lined up on the stone paving right beneath the blue sky. It was past lunch so there were only a few people. Kino was sitting at the last row of tables. On top of the table was a pot of green tea, a cup, and a finished plate of dessert. Hermes stood on his center stand opposite her.

A young waiter pushing a rubber-tired wagon approached. He asked if Kino wanted a second cup of tea .

“Kino, aren’t we leaving yet?”

“I’ll have one more cup.” As Kino requested, the pot was immediately replaced with a new one. Kino poured some into her cup. Steam and aroma arose from it.

“Jeez, why don’t you live in this country forever then? ”

Just when Hermes said this with an annoyed tone, a man sat on the table to their right. It was a thin man who seemed to be in his forties. He was neither wearing office nor work clothes. He was only wearing simple slacks and a long-sleeved shirt.

“…”

Kino looked at the man. The man’s cheeks were gaunt, and the corners of his eyes were wrinkled—they carried extreme exhaustion. It was not like he was tired just now; it was as if his lethargy lasted day in and day out, weariness solidified on his face.

The man glanced at Kino and Hermes. The moment he was about to say something, the waiter approached, so he requested tea.

When the waiter left,

“Hello.” Kino bowed in greeting.

“Ah, great weather, isn’t it? —A traveler, huh? That’s nice,” the man answered with a calm voice, indifferently, with no hint of unpleasantness.

“I am Kino. This here is my partner Hermes. We stayed in this country since the day before last. I’ll be leaving today, though this is a very nice country,” Kino said.

The man carried the tea cup to his lips. “Isn’t it,” he answered without any change in his tone. “This country is a great place for everyone, except for me. —Yeah, it is such a wonderful country. —No doubt about it.”

“Except for you?”

“What do you mean?” Hermes asked.

The man answered with the same expression and tone as before, “I am not supposed to say this to anyone…but if it’s to a traveler who is leaving today, I suppose it won’t hurt.” Then he continued,

“You see, I don’t die.”

—

The blue sky, the greenery and the flowers blooming in profusion in the park.

While looking at these, the two people seated at the end of the café exchanged words.

“Did you just say ‘I don’t die’?”

“Yeah. —I don’t die.”

“Then that means you have lived for many years already?”

“No. —That’s not quite right. The me here right now is not yet 28 years old.”

“… Then, how?”

Before answering Kino’s question, the man quickly drained his cup of tea.

“Through continuation of memories. —My memories are being carried on.”

“What was that again?” Hermes asked.

“There are memories from a long, long time ago inside me. —Memories before I was born. —Memories of other people who lived here before. —Memories before that. —And memories before that. —And before that. —And before that. Off the top of my head, I have memories of five humans. Basically, it’s nothing but several lifetimes continuing on end.”

“That’s a bit… Well, this may be rude, but is that for real? Maybe you’re mistaken, or confused…,” Kino asked while looking at the man. The man answered, gaze still straight ahead.

“Four generations ago— I was twenty years old at the time, and like you, I thought that the memories of another lifetime that appeared inside my head were only hallucinations or delusions. That’s what I believed. And so, out of the desire to clarify things, I investigated. Eventually, I found records.”

“…”

“That ‘me’ certainly existed. It was a man who died in an accident when I was just five years old. That man’s wife was still alive, and I met with her. —I remember everything so well; things that I’m not supposed to know . The wife’s hobbies, way of talking, and so on—I guessed them all correctly, it was so creepy. —Even though I loved her, she told me to stay away from her. Even though it has been close to a hundred years since then, I could still clearly remember it. —The memories of the generation before that have become rather blurry though.”

“What did you do after that?”

“After that— I lived that life. Eventually, I got married, and died from an illness at around fifty, if I remember correctly. The next is another man’s— and as expected I had memories from when I was five. I tried to tell my parents about the things that I recall, but they wouldn’t let me. Eventually, they got angry, so I gave up trying to tell them. The parents from that lifetime— Well except for that, they’re kind.”

“What happened after that?”

“That life also came to an end. If I’m not mistaken, when I was around thirty, I drowned in a lake. The next one is another man’s life. I got married, had children, and lived long enough to see my grandchildren. The next one was the life before this one. And now—”

“…”

“…”

“It doesn’t really matter whether you believe it or not.”

“I don’t know whether that story is possible or not, but I can’t think of any reason why you would lie to us here now.”

“You’re an interesting one, traveler,” the man said without smiling, and then, “It’s been quite a long time since I last met a traveler—”

“Hmm…you mean your previous lifetimes? What kind of traveler did you meet?”

The man pondered over Hermes’ question for a while with a countenance as inexpressive as ever.

“The ones I met before…as to which me it was, I don’t remember, and I have already forgotten…was a man and a woman riding a small, battered, yellow car. I say meet—but I was actually only a child back then, so I only remembered the woman alighting from the car, asking me for directions. The woman thanked me graciously. It was a long-haired woman. Ah! She was wearing a revolver similar to the one on your hip, traveler. No, it was exactly the same type. I could clearly remember it, because it was on my eye level.”

“… Those people, how did they behave in this country ?”

“Ah. Afterwards those two—since everything was free—ate until we thought their bellies would burst, and took everything they could get until the tires of their car almost broke, then left. It became news. That greed became the talk of the town for a while. I also had that impression about those two.”

“…”

Kino kept silent, while Hermes asked, “Well let’s get back on topic. If that story of ‘not dying’ is the real deal, isn’t that amazing?”

“I thought so too, a long, long time ago— I became conceited with thoughts that I’m special, or close to being a God. I thought it was so wonderful to get to live in this laid-back country for eternity.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. To live a person’s life, to remember about different people. In my next life, nobody would know me . To do everything again from the beginning. To repeat everything again. But about two generations ago, I already began to despise it all. I’m already tired of it. I’m already sick of it. I’m so tired—”

The man took the pot and poured tea into the cup without looking. He continued to pour blindly, and returned the pot when the cup was exactly eighty percent full.

“I’ve had enough. I don’t want to do anything anymore. Living endlessly. Having new memories—Whether it be good or bad, I’m already tired. It’s depressing.”

“Depressing…?”

“Yes. It’s as if the memories are attacking me. It’s like being surrounded and beaten with sticks all at once. —But even if I commit suicide it will still be the same. I don’t want the painful memories because even those would remain. To pass time doing the lowest work without doing any thinking; to do the same thing every day and prevent making special memories—during my previous life, I started living with these thoughts in mind. I want to stop but I can’t. It’s like a wheel running continuously. I wondered many times over whether this isn’t hell. I even thought, I might as well go insane, maybe then I would be at peace. But I am scared. What if my memories from being mad remained? Such a thing—I definitely don’t want them to get carried on.”

“…”

“And so I won’t make memories. I’ll live each day in the same way, and forget each day. I’ll do my best to forget.”

“Eh, then isn’t today a bad thing then?” Hermes asked with neither restraint nor mercy. Then the man drank his tea in one gulp. He stood up aimlessly, slowly turned his head, and looked down at Kino and Hermes.

“Who are you?”

The man only muttered these words with eyes that seemed to have awakened, and walked away.

—

“For some people, even heaven can be tough, huh.”

Hermes spoke when the man disappeared. And then,

“Master’s story was true after all. I was surprised.”

“…”

While the still silent Kino drank her cold tea,

“Miss traveler, did that man tell you anything?” The waiter who came to tidy up the man’s portion asked her with a worried look on his face.

“When we mentioned how much we liked this country , that person said that he didn’t agree,” Kino said, and the waiter displayed a look of relief.

“That guy always sits in that place at this time of the day, but he doesn’t say much, so it was a little strange for him to do that today. —It’s fine as long as he didn’t give you any disturbing thoughts.”

“What kind of person is he?” Hermes asked.

“Who knows? He almost doesn’t talk to other people, so I have no idea.” The waiter shrugged. And then, When I noticed that he was talking to you, I was really surprised. I won't forget that for a while."

"That's for dinner."

"Like teacher, like student."

Night was already approaching when Kino, who was in front of the gates, hung big cloth bags containing free stuff she obtained on Hermes' handlebars. Inside were meat for steaks from the butcher, and fruits she got from the fruit seller.

"The next time we come to this country, let's have a sidecar attached to you, Hermes."

"Stop it."

After bowing to the immigration inspector who went to see them off, Kino passed through the gates while pushing Hermes along. After passing through the tunnel-like gate, and when she has taken a step into the flower fields outside the country,

“Traveler!”

They were called out with a loud voice. Kino looked around, and faced six men. They have different ages, but everyone was wearing white robes.

“We apologize for the intrusion, but we only wanted to talk to you for a bit. It won’t take much of your time,” said a middle-aged man who seemed to be the oldest among them.

Kino put down Hermes’ side stand. The men standing in front of Kino bowed lightly, and the man before continued,

“Miss traveler, in the morning, while you were in the café at the central park, you were spoken to by a man, right?”

“Yes.”

“Yup.”

“To be honest, we are doctors from this country, and that man is under our care. We would like you to tell us what kind of things he told a traveler who doesn’t belong to this country.”

“…”

Kino contemplated for a moment before answering, “ Um, that person told me a pretty weird story about his personal history. —That he had memories of other people in the past, generation after generation. That is, that he doesn’t die.”

The men in white robes were evidently shocked with Kino’s words. One of them eagerly ran his pen on a thick file that he was holding.

“T-that time, how did he appear while saying that? Did he say that calmly? Or does it look as if he was lying ?”

“If I were to choose between the two, it was calmly.”

“Was he sweating or stammering in particular?”

“Not at all,” Hermes answered. Kino also shook her head sideways.

“It doesn’t seem to me like he was lying. But his story was really outrageous.”

“I see…”

And then the men talked to each other about something in low voices, nodding and shaking their heads from time to time.

“What do you think?” Hermes talked in a small voice so that only Kino would hear.

“I would like to know what they’re talking about… But it doesn’t look like they’re going to tell us.”

“Boring, isn’t it?”

“Boring alright,” Kino returned. She reflected for a bit, and murmured, “Since we don’t have anything to lose, let’s try trapping them into answering our questions…”

“Oh, I agree. That’s mean considering it’s you, Kino.”

“I would like to know the truth if it is within my ability.”

And then Kino talked to the men who were in the middle of their discussion.

“By the way—”

The men in white robes who seemed to have forgotten about Kino turned around. And then the middle-aged man spoke, “Ah, I’m sorry. It took quite some time. —Thank you very much. You were a big help.”

“There’s one thing I would like to ask, though…”

“Huh? What is it?”

“This country is such a great place to live in. I actually thought it a pity that I have to leave,” Kino said.

“That’s right!” Hermes agreed from behind.

“We’re happy to hear that.”

And then, Kino questioned the men who had broad smiles in their faces. “It strikes me as odd how a neurotic person like that appeared in such a wonderful country. Maybe no country is perfect, after all?”

The men’s smiles twitched.

“Yeah! Something’s terribly wrong. You guys are psychiatrists, aren’t you? Why did that guy become like that? The environment must have something to do with it.” Hermes said. A young man looked obviously offended with his words. The elderly man put his hands on his shoulder to pacify his anger.

“Traveler. This is a rather big misunderstanding. I believe you have seen how wonderful our country is with your own eyes.”

“Yes, indeed. That’s why I’m interested to know what could have possibly happened in this wonderful country for that man to go insane. As doctors, you probably won’t be too happy with it, but if you can, please tell me,” Kino stated her request frankly.

“Ah, but Kino, these guys don’t know a thing, that’s why they’re asking us about it, right? Then it’s no good,” Hermes said, being deliberately rude.

The young man who was on the verge of exploding was held back, and the middle-aged man walked to Kino and Hermes. He was wearing a rather stern expression, and began to speak with a rising tempo.

“It would be really troublesome to us if you, who don’t even know the truth, start spreading bad rumors about our country. Please believe me when I say that there is not a single person in our country who has fallen mentally ill.”

“I understand that. But we are truly surprised to meet someone who would tell us such things, and to top it off, doctors are examining this person…”

The middle-aged man gave a big nod.

“Fine then. As matters stand, we will definitely be misunderstood. We can tell you the truth…”

The men behind were stunned at these words, but he restrained their protests with one hand,

“But, you can never step inside our country a second time. Will that be okay?”

Kino deliberated for some time while being pestered by Hermes. And after she agreed with the condition, the middle-aged man told her at last,

“Fine, then I will tell you everything.”

The other white-robed men at the back said nothing, and only observed the course of events. The sun has inclined greatly to the west, shining inside the castle gates. The white robes of the men were dyed a light orange.

“Everything that man said was the truth.”

“…”

“What in the world?!”

Kino remained wordless while Hermes let out an exaggerated exclamation of surprise.

“Inside that man, there are memories beyond his generation. These are ‘true facts’. These are absolutely not assumptions or delusions. And also— You already know don’t you?”

“That you doctors carried it out…”

“That’s right. A long time ago, our ancestors successfully performed an experiment: immediately after death, they took out that person’s memories and transplanted them into another person. This was a system created to tackle the idea of eternal life, which everyone yearned for at least once in their lives.”

“Wait a minute. Even though that person inherits memories, it doesn’t change the fact that he dies, right? Having one or two people carry the same memories is not the same as ‘immortality’, is it?” Hermes asked.

The middle-aged man admitted this with a rather delighted look on his face.

“Exactly. That person will die, of course. But the person who inherited his memories would misinterpret it , and will come to the conclusion that he lives forever because he has memories of the past.”

“That makes sense.”

“However, for someone else, the fact that ‘a person who remembers about me’ will continue to exist, regardless of appearance, doesn’t change. This is a system for others to see that ‘someone is continuing to live forever’.”

“I see…”

“I get it.”

Kino and Hermes confirmed their understanding.

“You mean, that person received the memories at least four times?” Kino asked.

“Yes. From his resulting behavior, we can say that for certain. Those memories were definitely inherited, and even now, continues to accumulate. He is a test subject of an enormous national experiment. Be it by illness, accident, or old age, at any rate, once he dies, a person will be chosen at random to receive all the memories accumulated until now.”

“Then the person who will be the container for the memories…will become a sacrifice?” Hermes asked.

“It’s fine even if you see it that way. You can also call them as the children of the parents who, in circumventing the strict limit on having children, gambled on the chance that this would not happen after they have accepted the possibility that it could. When the test subject dies, the memories will be transferred to a five-year-old among them.”

“Therefore, if you were lucky not to have your child ‘ used’, you can have more children than the specified limit,” Hermes said. The middle-aged man nodded firmly.

“Yes. And there are many such people in this country. ”

“I understand… Please continue.”

“Yes— But the point is that ‘this is an ongoing experiment’. At least, you must understand that this is not a country who spouts out mentally-ill people.”

“I understand that. I withdraw my statements earlier. I apologize.”

“That’s right. I’m sorry.”

Upon hearing this, the middle-aged man gave a big nod albeit somewhat proudly.

“Incidentally, what is the purpose of this experiment?”

“Eh? Oh. To learn ‘how many generations the human brain can withstand accumulating memories from’.”

“Then, if the results come out, and if things go smoothly, what will you do? You will do this to everyone ?”

The middle-aged man vehemently shook his head in reaction to Hermes’ question.

“Preposterous! It’s just the opposite.”

“Eh?”

“Huh?”

“Although we developed this system, no matter how much we look at it, we can only conclude that it should not be used. The conclusion our ancestors came to, that ‘ it is a mistake for humans to have another person inherit their memories at their convenience.’ was correct. Even now, we think this way, and we believe that if this system were to be utilized, it will be the end if this country.”

“But the experiment…”

“But the experiment…”

Kino and Hermes said the same thing at the same time
.

“… The experiment will be continued, right?” Kino finished the question for both of them.

“Yes. It is to completely prove that ‘this system is wrong’.”

“…”

“…”

“So that it will never be used, we have to prove how dangerous this system is. If we do so, then no one will ever think that this is a ‘wonderful’ thing.”

“Well, I suppose that’s right…”

“This experiment began with forty test subjects. During the course of the study, we expected that by the third generation, the accumulation of memories will become unbearable. Thirty-nine of the test subjects exhibited this. They all went mad.”

“…”

“…”

“He is the last one. If he becomes insane, then the danger of this system will be 100% proven, and this system will be sealed for eternity. We will continue to observe, investigate, and take records generation after generation—until the day he becomes insane.”

Under the pallid moonlight, amidst the flower fields bathed with its brightness.

“I’ll try to roast it properly today.”

The black-jacketed Kino was holding up two skewered steaks above a bonfire made from dried grass. It roasted, and the sound of fat falling off was heard.

Hermes was parked beyond the bonfire, the moonlight and the fire being reflected off his tank.

While carefully roasting the meat, Kino sprinkled a pinch of salt and pepper from a small bag. She didn’t forget to prepare a plate, knife, and fork on top of the bag unloaded from Hermes.

“What a wonderful steak. I won’t be able to eat something like this for a while. —I will memorize its taste, so that I won’t ever forget.”

“Penny-pincher!” Hermes said with an appalled expression.

“Being able to forget things you want to forget, and being able to remember things you want to remember, is such a great thing, you know,” Kino said as she quickly reversed the meat.

Kino put the grilled meat in the plate and started to eat . When she had finished the meat, she cut up the fruits and ate it up.

“I’m happy,” Kino muttered as she looked up at the round moon.

“There are a lot of things, but I’m happy that I can remember after all. —It’s possible that I feel warm right now because I remember the cold of winter.”

“I don’t really get it,” Hermes grumbled with no interest, and teased, “It may be that motorrads completely forget things once they sleep at night.”

“That may be true. Nope, I’m sure it is,” Kino moved her gaze to Hermes and replied with a meek expression.

“Oh, why?”

“See Hermes, you can’t wake up properly in the morning even if I take the trouble of telling you the night before: ‘We’re leaving tomorrow so wake up early.’ I reminded you last night, too.”

After Kino answered the question, Hermes kept silent for a good dozen of seconds before speaking.

“You did?”

“Evening of Good People” —Innocence—

Chapter Two

“Evening of Good People”

— Innocence —

There was a dry river bed in a wilderness.

A big river flowed through the rough, rocky terrain. The river carved the ground; only its dry river bed blessed with vegetation. If viewed from the sky, one would probably see a green band amidst the brown.

On this dry river bed was a truck and a small, battered car creating long shadows upon being illuminated by the sun that was beginning to set.

And the owners of these vehicles surrounded a bonfire .

First there was a trader who owned the truck—a rather plump, middle-aged man. Then there was his wife. And standing behind the two, wearing hand persuaders (Note : A persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol) on their waists, were four male bodyguards.

Facing the trader was a young, black-haired woman wearing a large-caliber revolver on her hip. Seated next to her was a rather short, but handsome man.

An iron grill was placed in the bonfire. On top of it, a big chunk of meat was being grilled appetizingly.

The trader spoke cheerfully, “Now, travelers. It must be fate for us to meet in a place like this. Please help yourselves.” The trader was as bountiful as he appeared. “I feel generous because I just returned from a successful trade,” he said.

“Wow, it looks so delicious.” Saying this, the man beside the black-haired woman slightly lifted his thumb in a way that only the woman would see.

‘What do you think? Should we attack them?’ was the general meaning of his signal, but the woman slightly touched the nail of her ring finger in reply, ‘They have four bodyguards, so let’s lay low for today.’ The man nodded. The two thanked the trader for the meal, and the little dinner party began pleasantly.

The trader sent for liquor in a ceramic pot, and offered it to the two. But the pair only thanked him and declined.

“Oh? So it’s true that travelers don’t drink much, eh? Well, I suppose it would be tough to move around if you’ re carrying liquor.” Saying so, the trader gulped down his alcohol heartily.

The meal eventually progressed along with the sundown .

“I’m jealous of you, totally free to travel as you please! Gahahahahaha—”

The trader’s drunkenness has also progressed just as much. His face was already red, and he was being loud, but both his wife and his bodyguards only looked on as if it was natural.

“But for you to be traveling at that age, there must be some big reason, huh?! Could you possibly be ×××××?” the trader said to the black-haired woman. Instead of the woman, it was the man next to her who stiffened from the remark.

“Well, it doesn’t mean that ××××× is a bad thing! But a ××××× is a ××××× after all!”

The woman, staying cool all throughout, only warded off the man’s remarks with yes’s and maybe’s.

“Master…hold back,” the man muttered with a small voice, heart going pit-a-pat in anticipation of the woman’ s angry outburst.

The completely drunk trader was being unmindful, gulping down some more liquor.

“Gahahahaha! Well, ×××××! You must be really ××××× ! How wonderful! By the way, I wonder if a ××××× is really ×××××?” he said. And with a loud voice that would probably reach a far-away country, but perhaps unintentionally, he repeated the rude words over and over.

The man’s monologue continued. Even so, the black-haired woman casually eluded his taunts, and just when the man was becoming impressed with the strength of the woman’s tolerance level,

“I’m really sorry,” the trader’s wife, who had been quiet from the start, began to speak. Her words were that of an apology, but her tone had no hint of remorse in it at all. It was merely an excuse to start a conversation. The wife continued, “He would have been a good person if only he didn’t drink alcohol.”

“I see,” the woman lifted her head. She confirmed the bodyguards’ location in one glance. Then she extracted the revolver from her right hip.

Neither giving the man next to her the time to react nor giving the four bodyguards a chance to notice, four shots echoed in the wilderness.

All the bullets hit the persuaders on the bodyguard’s hips, rendering them useless. Before the dumbfounded group, the woman aimed at the forehead of the trader.

“Now then, won’t you hand over your valuables to us? ” she said with a sweet smile.

—

Amidst the pale darkness of the twilight, the bodyguards were sitting with their hands tied behind them while the trembling wife was tied behind her husband, who was already sober and whose face was now deep red in anger .

“W-w-what a thing to do! You ingrates!”

“We won’t take everything. Maybe about thirty percent,” the black-haired woman said while transferring jewels and gold coins in a bag.

“…”

The man beside her, who was prudently keeping watch with his .22 caliber automatic persuader, remained silent.

“Those are my earnings!” the trader protested.

“And now they’re mine,” the woman quickly answered. When she has finished transferring the jewels, she placed what was left in front of the trader.

And then she instructed the man to let out air from the tires of the truck so that they would not be able to chase after them. So that the tires could still be used when filled with air, he only removed the valve and let all of the air inside escape.

“Well, goodbye. The dinner was delicious.”

The woman started the car’s engine and called the man
.

“What kind of woman would do this?! This is preposterous!” The trader let loose his anger, and the man spoke to him as he left,

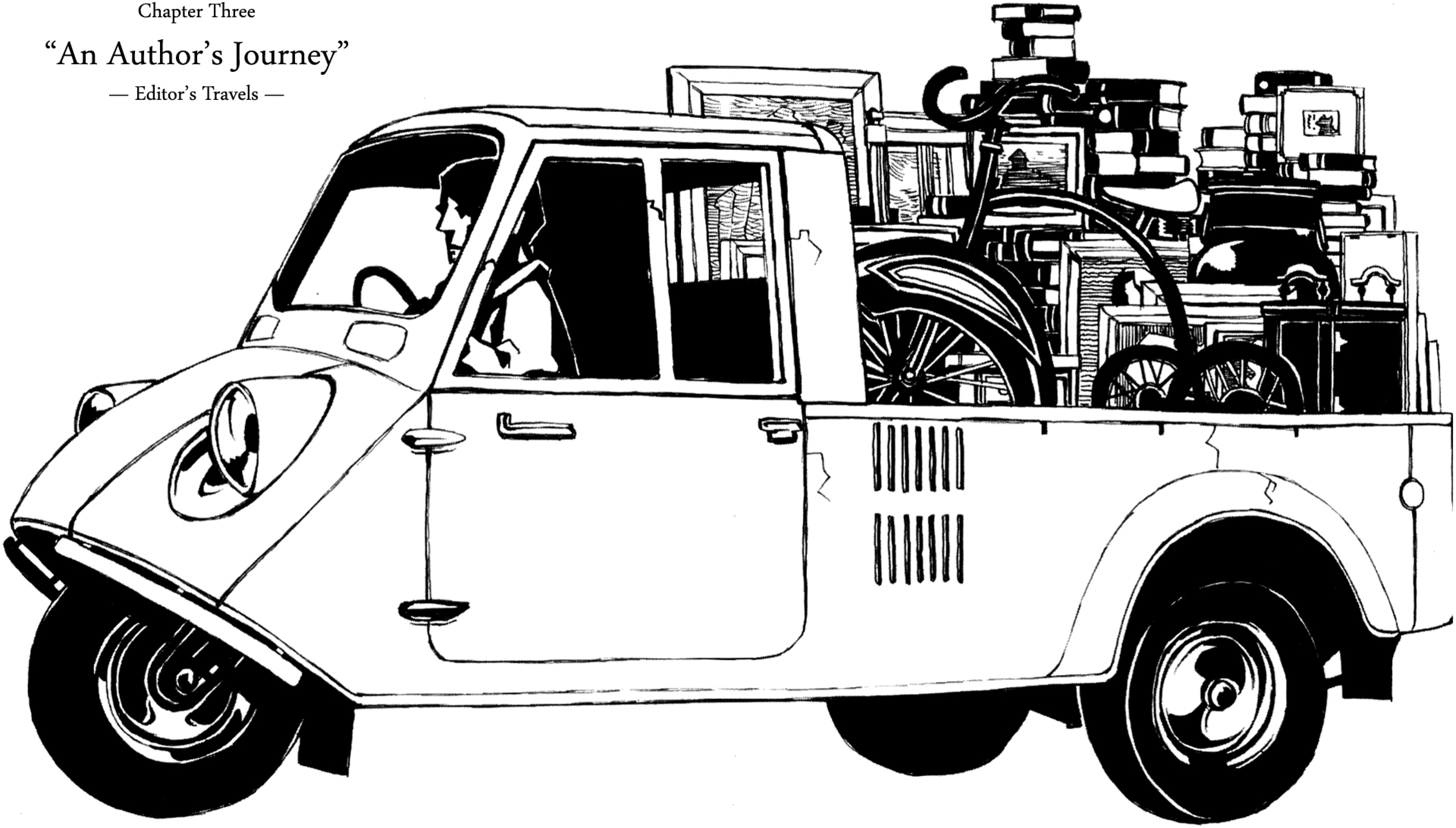
“I’m really sorry. She would have been a good person if only she couldn’t fire a persuader…”

“An Author’s Journey” —Editor’s Travels—

Chapter Three

“An Author’s Journey”

— Editor’s Travels —



“You don’t need to hold back! Eat some more! If this is not enough, I’ll order more right away. —I also traveled, so I know. During your travel in between countries, you *barely* eat anything, don’t you? You only consume those nutrient-rich, but tasteless portable rations, or fish sprinkled with salt, or boiled grass. I’m sure it has been a long time since you’ve eaten such a wonderful barbecue full-course meal, right?”

“Well yeah, that’s right… It has truly been a long time.”

“On the road, Kino kept on grumbling about food. She said she would eat a wonderful meal once she arrived in a country.”

“That’s why you should eat up as much as you want today. Keep me company until morning! It’s my treat! You don’t have to worry about anything, Kino.”

“Isn’t that great, Kino?”

“Of course, like I promised, I’ll also buy new oil, tires, chain, plugs, and all those other exhaust parts for Hermes! Leave it to me!”

“Thank you, miss. —Hey Kino, thank her too.”

“Thank you very much. Well, I’ll let you treat me then …but I have nothing to give you in return.”

“You only have to tell me various stories about your travels so far. Come on, let’s eat!”

—

“—So, that’s all I can tell you about the countries I came across east from here. But it doesn’t mean that I have seen everything from those countries… Was that helpful? ”

“Yup, it was. Thanks. —Isn’t this meat delicious? Let’s order another plate. And some drinks too. In this restaurant, all you need is a push of a button to order something, and then it comes out immediately. —Here we go.”

“Sure…”

“Miss, you’re really rich, aren’t you?”

“Well that’s true. I’m a best-selling author, you know. Even now, my book is getting reprints, so money comes in even if I don’t do anything. Oh, here comes the meat. Eat up, eat up!”

“Oh, thanks. I’ll dig in. —But, was what you said before true? That you were originally a traveler like me?”

“Yes that’s right. —It has been more than a year since I came to this country. Before that, I stayed for about half a year in various countries that I visited.”

“You’re a genuine traveler, huh? Well, why?”

“Hmm, this country suited me for some reason. Ah, your question must be, ‘Why a traveler like me became an author in this country?’ eh?”

“Yes. Will you tell us?”

“The reason is simple. Because my book sells here. You must have seen the books being sold in the bookstores with my name and portrait on them, right?”

“We saw it. Piles of them.”

“I did. In fact, I read it after seeing the book in the hotel where it’s apparently being strongly recommended …”

“Why thanks. Well, how was it?”

“It was interesting…I enjoyed it very much. Everyone in the hotel also said that it was interesting.”

“Yeah? I’m so glad. I’m truly happy hearing the readers’ sincere feedbacks!”

“But…um, I don’t know if it’s okay to say this…”

“Hmm? No one’s listening, so it’s okay.”

“Don’t say it, Kino. This place is for parting.”

“…?”

“Could it be, that what Hermes wanted to say was ‘ partying’?”

“Yeah, that’s it! So impressive, miss!”

“Hermes…”

"Well it doesn't matter. Don't say it, Kino."

"Please do."

"Then I'll say it. —That story, I have read it before in another country. From what I remember, the author was not you."

"Yeah. —And then?"

"Save for the name of the characters, the customs that do not exist in this country…and the language, it was completely identical."

"Well, what were your thoughts about it, Kino?"

"Since you were a traveler, it is not totally impossible that you have published that book there with a different name in the past…but if I had to say, I don't think that's the case—"

"Please continue."

"Okay. In the end, this is what I thought. —You have read and copied that book, and then you published it in this country as your 'own novel'."

“Excellent! Yes, you realized it! Correct! Spot on!”

“Eh?”

“Wha—?”

“Why are you so surprised? It’s just as you say, Kino.”

“Uh…”

“Is that okay? Confessing it just like that.”

“It’s fine! No one’s listening after all.”

“…”

“…”

“If the two of you leave tomorrow without saying anything, then that’s already settled.”

“Well, I suppose so.”

“What if we tell?”

“The bill for *all* of this food will be on Kino. And the plans for Hermes’ refurbishment will be but a dream.”

“Don’t say anything, Kino. —Don’t say a word.”

“I’m not gonna tell, Hermes.”

“I thought so. That’s because you are travelers. I know that you won’t do anything that would put you in a disadvantage.”

“Then…just as I thought…”

“Indeed. Of my books, there’s not a single one that I have written on my own.”

“Not even one?”

“Not even one. —You see, initially, I escaped my country because I thought I would live my whole life in boredom until I die. But the tough diet during travels and the impoverished life inside countries were even worse! I couldn’t even celebrate after selling up the things I found on my travels. And that’s when it struck me.”

“Uh-huh?”

“After all, if you visit various countries, earning money from things that can be easily obtained in one country, but rare in another country is something any traveler knows, and does. But I thought, ‘Was there something out of these that I can reap the highest profit from?’”

“And that is…books?”

“Yes! For other objects, once you’ve sold one, that’s it. No matter how expensive it was. —But books are different. Even if it’s just one book, if it becomes popular, there will be earnings from reprints.”

“Indeed, you’ll reap a profit from that.”

“Isn’t it? I decided to do this kind of work. I read every book that I could lay my hands on from a certain country , piled up all the books I thought interesting on my horse, and headed to the next country. Over there I would look for a bookstore and find out what kind of book would sell. Then from my collection of books, I would choose one that is not known in that country—one that would sell—and copy everything.”

“And then you would send it to a publisher?”

“Yes, I would bring it in and say something like, ‘ Please read it. It was something I wrote during my travels.’”

“I see, I see.”

“Of course, I didn’t expect everything to go well at the beginning. In the first place, a high quality translation is necessary for it to be published. In the end, I can only try one or two books. At first they wouldn’t sell, so I purchase books once more and head to the next country, and do the same thing.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And then?”

“Gradually, I learned ‘What story would sell in this country’, ‘What would appeal to most of the people in this country’, and so on. I studied them. —After that, it’s an easy victory! I would choose the best books from my collection and make my debut as an author! I’ll profit from the earnings and enjoy a lavish lifestyle. Once I got bored of a country, I would be sent off with tears from everyone and go to the next country. It’s such a wonderful life.”

"Have you been doing this for a long time?"

"Let's see. It's been about ten years, I suppose?" I already forgot. But—"

"But?"

"My everyday life is so much fun."

"Must be. I bet it's far from Kino's life of poverty—Ouch!"

"It's not that I'm criticizing you… But aren't you deceiving the publishers and the readers with this?"

"It's all right. Regardless of the kind of country you're in, the readers are always being fooled. None of them realize that they're being deceived. People who don't think they're being fooled are not being fooled at all. —More than that, everyone's happy with reading such interesting books. I receive tons of fan letters saying 'I was very impressed!' or 'It was such a wonderful book!' or 'I'm glad I've read this book!' If it were not for me, they wouldn't be able to read these books. I believe I'm doing everyone a favor."

“I see… Well, what about the publisher? I think it’s quite clear that they are being made to publish a ‘ plagiarized work’?”

“Ah, that’s also perfectly okay, that I can say for certain.”

“Why?”

“Of course I didn’t say a thing to them, and they wouldn’t say anything either, because—”

“Because?”

“Because?”

“Why obviously, it’s because they found out about my trick already.”

“Land of Electromagnetic Waves” —Not Guilty—

Chapter Four

“Land of Electromagnetic Waves”

— Not Guilty —

My name is Riku. I am a dog.

I have long, shaggy white fur. My face makes me look as if I’m happy and smiling all the time, but it doesn’t mean that I am. I was just born this way.

Shizu is my master. He is a young man who always wears a green sweater, and has been traveling by buggy ever since he lost his homeland due to complex circumstances.

—

Just before this, Master Shizu was stabbed with a knife and sustained a rather critical wound. But with adequate treatment from the person who helped us, and with Master Shizu’s naturally tough constitution, the wound did not become fatal.

After the person who helped us has left, for Master Shizu’s body to recuperate completely, we stayed for a while in a beach where no one else visits and let several days pass by in peace.

And during that time, various objects were washed ashore.

Waterproof wooden boxes full of food, bottles of water, all sorts of ammunition and bombs, cans of fuel, bags of clothes. And at times, even valuable articles.

All of these, without a doubt, came from “that country”. As to what has become of this country, I do not know.

—

Muffled explosions reached us in the interior of the tent that was brightly illuminated by the morning sun. Twice, in succession. And then it became quiet.

“Going at it again, huh,” Master Shizu said with a laugh. While he sat cross-legged, he slowly removed the bandage from his stomach. When he has finally removed the gauze, he found that the wound beneath it has fully healed. There were the traces of a scar from a wound that was roughly stitched. It will probably remain there for the rest of his life.

“It’s all right now. Once we finish preparations, we can leave immediately,” Master Shizu said as he put on a T-shirt. Then he wore his usual green sweater on top of it .

“What will become of Ti?” I asked of the girl who caused Master Shizu’s wound. Right now, this person is in a nearby rocky area, catching our breakfast in a rather violent manner by throwing hand grenades underwater.

Master Shizu answered with a laugh, “We’ll be fine with the buggy.”

Food and fuel, change of clothing, items that seemed sellable, Ti’s beloved hand grenades and the springing knife—those were the only things Master Shizu packed in the buggy. Yet the buggy was now one size larger.

On the driver’s seat was Master Shizu, wearing a parka over his sweater, and goggles around his eyes.

And on the passenger’s seat was the green-eyed, white-haired girl, who wore a baggy black jacket as a coat; it was one of the items washed ashore that she had grown fond of.

Having lost my previous spot, I settled between her skinny legs in a rather stiff posture.

“I’m indebted. I will never forget this scenery.”

“…”

Leaving these words of salutation, we left the beach where we have spent many days.

The surface of the sea reflected in the side mirror gradually became farther away, and was soon no longer in sight. The buggy ran with the hum of the engine in excellent condition.

“It’s all right. I’m sure we’ll soon find a country pleasant to stay in.”

So as not to lose to the sound of the warm gust of wind , Master Shizu spoke with a cheerful and reassuring tone to Ti.

“…”

Ti was as silent and as expressionless as ever.

‘We’ll soon find.’

That probably won’t be the case, I thought.

And perhaps, that sort of thing doesn’t matter.

* * *

A spring shower drizzled over a vast prairie.

The temperature was neither high nor low, and the humidity was tolerable enough.

Here and there were big trees. The buggy stopped under one such tree.

A blue vinyl sheet was stretched on top of the car’s body for protection against the rain. One end was tied to the bumper, and another on a branch of the tree.

Big raindrops would occasionally fall from the branches and leaves, and drop with a plop on the tarp. Each time, Ti would look up from the passenger seat then return her gaze to the front. **Plop**. Then she would again look up.

Master Shizu lightly closed his eyes while in the driver ’s seat, while I crouched over the hood, as we waited for the rain to let up. If the rain continued for the whole day, they will have to wear their rain gear and continue driving, but for now we’re taking a break. The sun peeks through the rifts in the clouds from beyond the horizon, so it will probably not take long before the rain stops.

“I wonder what kind of country the next one will be… ?” Master Shizu muttered with his eyes still closed. As usual, Ti,

“…”

Said nothing. Her green eyes only took a glance at the driver’s seat, then turned back her gaze.

I myself don’t have an answer to this question. No one could possibly know what kind of place it will be. There are many countries in this world, and none of them are completely alike.

But before that, we should worry about whether we would be able to find a country in this vast meadow. Even so, Master Shizu was optimistic, believing that it will be all right as long as we find a road.

The rain was still falling, but the clouds were already disappearing overhead. The sun shined down on us, and the blue sheet gleamed with the light.

Master Shizu unfastened the strings and folded up the sheet. An enormous rainbow formed in the sky ahead of us.

Upon a closer look, it was a twin rainbow.

* * *

While trodding over wet grass, the buggy ran in perfect condition over the prairie. It was headed west.

Before we set off, I feared that Ti would get nauseous from the jolts, but it seems that my worries were all for nothing. Ti was not the least agitated by the hard seat (well, there was a cushion underneath), the tight seatbelt, or the shaking of the vehicle. And it seemed that she even enjoyed the sceneries that greeted her eyes for the first time in her life. Upon seeing the deer and the large prairie animals in the distance,

“…”

She craned her neck as far as it would go to follow the animals with her gaze.

We spent the whole day running through the prairie, and by dusk, we discovered a lone road.

The road that ran along the north-south direction, had tire tracks on it. It must be a road that connected one country to another. Just like Master Shizu said, if we follow this road, we would be able to arrive to some country. To decide whether to follow the north or the south, Master Shizu dug his hand into a bag behind the seat and took out a coin, which he then placed into Ti’s hands.

“…”

Master Shizu explained to Ti, who was looking at the coin curiously. “You decide by throwing that. If it comes out heads, we’ll go south, if tails, we’ll go north.”

Ti nodded deeply, then threw the coin with her left hand. With all her strength.

The coin drew a parabola and dropped about ten meters away into the grassy plains.

“Ah. Riku, please fetch it.”

It was heads. We headed south.

That evening, Master Shizu put up a tent in the middle of the prairie. And inside it—

“In this kind of wind, you can throw it lightly and let the air seize it. You place it at the back of your other hand—”

—He was teaching Ti how to toss a coin.

The next morning.

While basking in the dazzling sunlight from our left, the buggy continued on the road going south.

Master Shizu and I normally don’t engage much in conversation while traveling. Nothing changed, except Ti was with us— Well, of course, Ti only stared tirelessly at the sceneries without saying a word.

Having meandered around for a while, it was soon lunchtime.

“I see it.”

Those were Master Shizu’s first words for the day. Then he pointed forward. The gray walls were slowly appearing from underneath the horizon. Ti turned her eyes towards that direction.

“…”

And only stared in silence.

“It seems like we don’t have to make our own lunch,” Master Shizu said.

* * *

We were given permission to enter without any problems, and at last, the mud-covered, luggage-filled buggy passed through the gates.

It was a big country. Even from afar, the wide walls could still be seen, and when we looked at the map located in the plaza in front of the gates, we could make out a warped area towards the southwest.

We rode through the country. It was a very orderly country. People walked around the tidy downtown lined up with traffic lights and clean cars running through it. There were no tall buildings, but it was only because they were not needed in such a spacious country. The public order also seemed good.

After passing through the town, we headed to the outskirts, with fields visible all around. Just as the immigration officer told us, we soon arrived at an inexpensive hotel with a parking space. It was a wide, one-storey building.

Usually, Master Shizu would take the cheapest and smallest room, but this time, he took a room with two beds in it.

Master Shizu enjoyed a longed-for shower, and washed me while he’s at it. Of course, I humbly declined, though I was undoubtedly, dirty.

It seems that Ti didn’t understand what a bath tub was for, but with Master Shizu’s simple explanations, she immediately learned. This girl was more adaptable than I thought.

In a nearby restaurant, where food was delivered immediately upon ordering, Master Shizu and Ti requested for bread with different kinds of cheese on top, and ate some well-cooked meals. Of course, it was probably Ti’s first time eating such food, and hence didn’t have any complaints. However, she didn’t seem too impressed as she was with the portable rations.

We spent that afternoon assigning tasks.

Master Shizu went to sell the objects that looked valuable, and bought the things that we needed. While waiting, Ti and I remained in the room to wash our clothes. Ti did what I told her to do. For the first time, this girl was being handy in a normal way.

“Now, there’s something I want to tell you.”

It was a more or less wonderful evening in our room. After our dinner, Master Shizu spoke to Ti, who sat opposite him on the round table.

“Looking around various countries, that is, ‘enjoying traveling’, is not our goal. I am looking for a country where I could settle down; a place where I could be useful to someone with the things that I am capable of.”

“…”

“I still don’t know everything about this country, and I’m planning to find out. So far, it doesn’t seem to be a bad country. Even the food is delicious.”

“…”

“Starting tomorrow, we’ll go around the country without any preconceptions or bias. If you notice anything, I would like you to tell me.”

“…”

“I also want you to be careful. There are many people who live in this country. Right now we are guests, so we should act the way travelers should. Be careful not to say or do anything that might hurt other people.”

This was some doubtful words coming from Master Shizu, who used to stick his neck into other people’s business, but this must be just a caution to Ti, who has yet no experience in traveling.

“You understand, right?”

Ti nodded sincerely and deeply, but what would happen later on will prove that she didn’t completely understand what she was just told.

—

The next day.

Master Shizu brought me and Ti along, and rode around the country. The weather was good.

Master Shizu was in his usual green sweater and jeans while Ti was wearing her long-sleeved, round-necked brown shirt and grey short pants. Aside from the fact that it was cleaner after being washed, there was nothing different.

Downtown, Master Shizu carried his sword in a bag. Ti carried her shoulder bag that seemed to contain a water bottle and portable rations inside.

We looked all over the wide country—the urban areas, the agricultural area, as well as the residential district.

As it was rare for the citizens to see a traveler, we were welcomed again and again. The residents in the urban district all gave way for our vehicle, while in the agricultural district, we were given tomatoes.

Master Shizu inquired about immigration, and learned that there would be little problem registering as a resident in the town hall, after which he could start working to earn money and pay for his taxes. Among the countries that accept strangers, it was really unusual to find one so generous.

As it has a democratic form of government, its representatives were chosen by an impartial election. Not too bad for Master Shizu, who have seen countries made fools by dictators and kings.

Its economy was also stable, and it seems that there are very few people who die of hunger. The citizens appeared to be living their lives in peace and happiness.

After the whole-day tour, Master Shizu came back to the room in high spirits.

—

“It’s a ‘normal country’.”

Master Shizu said. And he added that it was a difficult task for a normal country to work out, as the numerous people living in it should put in a lot of effort.

When I asked him if he liked it, Master Shizu nodded.

“I don’t think it’s a bad idea to try living here for a while.”

“…”

Ti was silent as always, and whether she agrees or not, or simply doesn’t care, no one could tell.

The next day as well, we went around the country to observe. It was a bit cloudier, and it looked like it’s going to rain.

But this country was just so big. Of course we have no idea who made it this way, but the walls ran even through plains and forests, as if these areas were enclosed just for the sake of being enclosed.

At the northern gates, we headed to a wide avenue going south just a few steps away. We vacated yesterday’s hotel.

The southern avenue was very lively. Cars were running through the street, and there were many people.

“…”

As it was filled with things that Ti has seen for the first time, no matter where we go and walk in, her head fidgeted about.

In one corner of a street lined up with big houses and shops, Master Shizu parked the buggy in a fuel refilling stand. In places like this, it’s a strict regulation to only get enough for your needs.

While we’re refilling, Ti and I stood on the walkway and looked at the rows of stores.

It was near noontime, and under the cloudy sky, there were housewives going out shopping and workers going out for lunch. When they saw us, some of them waved their hands and smiled.

At that moment, a man came out from the side of the fuel refilling station and walked towards us.

It was a man in his fifties. He was thin and barefooted, wearing only a white shirt and his underwear. At the same time, he was dyed red with blood.

The man was holding something in his right hand. It was the freshly severed head of a human. He held the head from its long hair, swaying and barely grazing the pavement. The blood dripped from it, leaving traces on the sidewalk.

“…”

Ti stared at the man. I believe he was about twenty meters away from us.

“Master Shizu!”

At the same time I called out to Master Shizu, the woman who was keeping watch on the fuel stand raised a scream. The man walked aimlessly towards us. His expression was calm, as if everything was normal.

I jumped out in front of Ti, and couldn’t decide whether to growl, howl, or talk. And the moment I realized that it really didn’t matter, Master Shizu jumped out in front of me holding the sword in the bag.

“I thought it wasn’t possible but…I guess that look is not normal in this country?” Master Shizu muttered. Well, a country with blood-soaked men carrying severed heads walking around normally sounds pretty nasty.

Meanwhile, the half-crazed female employee screamed , “S-someone call the police! Police!”

When you think about it, an ordinary reaction for a passerby in situations like this is to scream.

“You, what do you think you’re doing? What’s that blood and head?”

Yet Master Shizu questioned the man like this.

“Shut up! Do you want to die too?”

Master Shizu moved as he heard this answer. He approached slowly and thrust the sword, scabbard, bag and all, towards the man’s stomach. The man let out a groan before collapsing.

The head fell to the sidewalk, rolled, and stopped on top of the cover of the gutter by the roadway.

—

It didn’t take long before a nearby police on rounds came . Master Shizu handed the man over.

As they did not know what happened, he reported what he saw and did to the police. The employees of the fuel refilling station vouched for us, so we were not suspected.

While muttering unintelligible words, the man was taken into custody. Pictures of the severed head were taken before it was put inside a bag. The pale-faced female employee came, and said that the man was the principal of a nearby kindergarten. They have been trying to call the kindergarten several times, but no one would pick up the phone, and no one would come out. This time, it was the policemen who turned pale.

Master Shizu followed after four policemen who set out. As Ti followed after Master Shizu, I had to look after her.

Some tens of meters away was the kindergarten building that looked like a miniature school. The bloodstains in the walkway led there, or rather, *came* from that place.

"Is anybody here?!"

A police called out, grabbed his hand persuader (Note: A persuader is a gun. In this case a pistol) then entered the building. I thought it was only natural for them to push us strangers out of the way, but maybe because they had no luxury of time to do so, they just allowed us to shamelessly follow from behind.

We headed to the place where the bloodstains originated, and came out to a wide room at the center of the building, and saw what was inside.

“Wah! Waa…”

A young policeman fainted and collapsed.

The whole room was filled with the stench of blood that it seemed more like a battlefield or an execution ground. Several corpses of beheaded women rolled about . They were probably day-care workers.

Copious amounts of blood seeped through the carpet on the floor, transforming the room into a crimson swampland. Within it, the tiny bodies of the kindergarten pupils tumbled about. A little over twenty.

Everybody had white foams coming out of their mouths, the flicker in their faded eyes already gone. Paper cups were scattered about.

“…”

Amidst the speechless policemen, Master Shizu, and myself, only Ti spoke.

“Everybody’s dead.”

—

That day, we stayed in a hotel near the police station. That’s because we tagged along the on-site investigation until it was almost evening.

The place transformed into a place filled with agonizing wails. The parents of the kindergartners rushed as soon as they heard the story, and fainted and screamed upon seeing the faces of their children being carried out inside bags. Yellow tape was placed around the place, and the residents of the neighborhood and the people concerned gathered in swarms.

In the end, they discovered that all twenty-two kindergartners and six day-care workers were poisoned. Moreover, the adults were all beheaded. Their after-lunch tea was laced with a lethal poison. There was almost no doubt that the kindergarten principal did everything by himself. They also found a bottle of poison and a blood-stained chainsaw. In one corner of the room, there was a huge pile of fuel. There was also a detonation apparatus set-up, but the handmade fuse was lost in the pool of blood.

It seems that Master Shizu was commended amidst it all, but he was not really interested. As there was no way for us to know beforehand or stop this massacre, he should be aware that we could have done nothing about the death of the children, but regardless, Master Shizu’s face remained gloomy.

Ti was the same as ever. She made short work of the dinner prepared for us.

That evening, the radio in our room continued to report the incident in an impassive and objective way as was possible. After listening to it for a while, Master Shizu spoke,

“If there are many people, this kind of thing also happens. —In poor countries, there are numerous crimes done by people to survive. But in countries as big and wealthy as this one, the opposite is true. I heard that those kinds of crimes are few, but in place, rare and bizarre crimes like this one happen. It’s really sad, but I guess there’s nothing we can do about it—”

This is an aside, but as a result of the confusion, the fuel for the buggy became practically free.

The next day.

The clouds hung even lower compared to yesterday. It wouldn’t be strange for it to rain at any moment.

After breakfast, Master Shizu headed to the police station. Ti and I followed. A middle-aged police chief appeared and let us in to a drawing room. The chief, together with his young lieutenant, sat with us at the table. Tea was served.

The chief thanked Master Shizu for cooperating with the police in arresting the perpetrator. Master Shizu asked if his testimony was necessary for the trial that will take place from then on. If needed be, though we had no idea how long it would take, he’s willing to extend his stay in the country.

The chief only shook his head.

“That won’t be necessary. That man will not be tried.”

Master Shizu’s eyebrows raised a little. My thoughts were that the gravity of this crime was such that it merits an automatic death penalty without trial, but I was mistaken. Instead the chief said this:

“That man, that principal’s actions, deviated from the norm.”

We already know that. Master Shizu also nodded.

"In this country, this kind of incident occurs once every few years. Bizarre mass murders. It's very sad and deplorable."

Just like Master Shizu said last night. I could still agree at this point.

"Those people were driven to their actions by an evil electromagnetic wave. That's why we couldn't punish them. That man will be considered innocent, and will be sent to a hospital to be isolated and receive treatment."

This one I failed to understand.

"What do you mean?" Master Shizu leaned forward and asked.

The chief stood up with a heavy face and walked towards the window. He gazed outside. It was not yet raining.

"This country has a rather sad history…"

The chief turned around as he said this. Master Shizu and I awaited the continuation of his words.

“It seems that a long, long time ago, a large number of slaves were gathered in this country. This story was from hundreds of years ago, you see. In order to make the slaves work, tiny devices were implanted inside their heads.”

“Devices, you say?” Master Shizu’s question was answered by the seated lieutenant.

“A device that sends and receives electromagnetic waves like a radio. According to our records, it was used to control people… If they didn’t go to such extent, it would be impossible to control the slaves over this vast territory. That period continued for a while, and at some point in time, for some unknown reason, the slaves were set free and continued to live in this land. Well, as this was an unwelcome fact from our past, we rarely tell travelers about it.”

“I understand. I will not tell anyone about it. And so, what’s the connection of this history to the incident yesterday?” Master Shizu addressed the chief. The chief turned around, and answered with a sour expression, “In this country, incidents such as the one you have witnessed yesterday were all caused by these devices and electromagnetic waves.”

“The electromagnetic waves’…fault?”

“That’s right.”

Master Shizu replied, and the chief confirmed confidently.

“In a forest to the west of the country, there is a vast area that everyone is banned to enter for eternity. Do you know what lies in that place?”

Master Shizu replied honestly that he didn’t know. He had seen the areas in the map, but we are yet to visit that area.

“Then I shall tell you. That forbidden area houses the ‘ electromagnetic signal base’. It was a base used to send off the electromagnetic waves, once operated by our ancestors. It has a powerful generator and a large antenna. —People who could operate that base has long since died, but the device remains. Once in a while, the machine would suddenly send off electromagnetic waves

, attacking our citizens, the descendants of the slaves. Those unlucky enough to receive the signals will give rise to sad incidents like yesterday’s, without regard to the person’s will. There is a constant possibility for anyone from this country to become like that kindergarten principal. Everyone in this country, including myself, dreads this. We couldn’t possibly sentence these individuals in accordance to common criminal laws. They are also victims. It’s not a question of the person’s responsibility. No matter what they did, we have no choice but to consider them innocent,” the chief declared with utmost seriousness. He returned to his seat , giving Master Shizu what looked like a glare.

“And as a police, I thank you for your actions yesterday. However, if you now have the impression that our country is a dangerous place for having crimes like that occur repeatedly, I want you to know that that is a big misinterpretation. In our country, there’s not a single person who truly wishes for such a thing to happen. It was all the electromagnetic waves’ fault. —Everyone understands that fact despite their suffering. And I want you to understand it too, traveler.”

In short, what he was trying to say was, ‘Outsiders like you who don’t know anything about our country should not have any wrong ideas.’

Master Shizu asked, “But then does this mean that the device has the ability to transmit its capabilities to the descendants?”

Just as expected, both the chief and his lieutenant looked somewhat injured by this remark. The lieutenant replied,

“Are you some sort of biologist, doctor, or physicist?”

“I am not any of those.”

“Then that question is slightly irrelevant. Our country has been plagued by this problem for years. It’s a reality set by our history,” the chief declared with much confidence.

Master Shizu changed the course of his inquiry.

“As this source of evil, the electromagnetic signal base, is no longer necessary, can’t you destroy it to resolve this problem?”

“You’d know the answer to that if you were listening closely,” the lieutenant began.

“If that were possible, we would have done it a long time ago. You can’t seem to wrap your head around the reason why it is forbidden to go near the electromagnetic signal base. If we so much as approach the base, the signals become powerful. We would lose our will. I would prefer it if you don’t say things that are not possible.”

“I see. It seems that way. I understand.”

So Master Shizu said.

And then,

“Then let me undertake this task. As a traveler and a person not originally from this country, I suppose the electromagnetic waves will have no effect on me. If I succeed, then everyone can live from now on without worrying about the electromagnetic waves.”

—

While driving the buggy,

“Well it’s lucky that we get to observe a place where everyone else is forbidden to enter, but this feels rather gloomy,” Master Shizu said. We were running on the plains inside the country, with Ti on the passenger seat, and I between her legs. It was only a little before noon, and the weather was as cloudy as ever.

As a result of our conversation in the police station, we are now in the middle of a mission to scout and destroy the electromagnetic signal base. After we lost sight of the streets, we rode towards the west in the midst of the derelict grassland.

By the way, Master Shizu asked Ti to stay behind, but she bluntly ignored his wishes and seated herself on the passenger seat.

Master Shizu was in his sweater while Ti was in her black coat. We received a knapsack full of high power bombs from the police station. We have enough of those to easily destroy one building.

He has accepted this task but if I understood him correctly, Master Shizu did not really buy the ‘ electromagnetic wave affects humans and so on’ talk. Same here.

Master Shizu continued. “Anyhow, that claim of a machine in their heads, remaining even after several generations is really something… However, the number of long-abandoned machines that are still in activity on its own that I have seen is not really zero.”

True. We’ve seen one just before this country. Though I can’t say much before we met Ti.

“That’s why there is a possibility that this electromagnetic base may still be moving on its own with a self-powered generator. If we take a picture as evidence that it has been completely destroyed, maybe the people will be relieved once and for all.”

“And we’ll be commended for it too. We can probably reap some benefit from that.”

“Well there’s that too, I guess.”

—

Soon a dense forest came into view. It was thick with twenty-meter tall trees, creating an entirely different world from the open plains where we came from. It was probably a reforested area. The electromagnetic signal base should be inside this place.

Master Shizu stopped the buggy. He shouldered the bag containing the explosives. Another worry of mine is the tiny box containing the detonator, in regards to Ti. Why, of all places they decided to put it around my neck. That girl was made to carry the borrowed camera, water, food, and her coat among other things.

And thus, we ended up going to a picnic inside the forest, in such a bad weather, and carrying a bomb with us.

The forest was dark. As it was a place where people are not allowed to enter, there was no road. We used a compass, and earnestly proceeded to the west while stepping on grass and climbing past fallen trees.

After about an hour, we found several vehicles that were rusting away, from small cars to big trucks. The bodies of the vehicles were black from rust, and were buried in plants. And a little bit further, we found the place that we were aiming for.

“This must be the place…”

Master Shizu muttered in front of it. He set down the knapsack. Ti and I stood beside him and looked at the same scenery.

Inside this forest, a facility with an antenna stood. Indeed, it’s an electromagnetic signal base.

At least it *was*.

“There’s no need for us to go as far as using explosives .”

Just as Master Shizu said, the electromagnetic base has rotted away a long time ago.

The hundred-meter tall tower that probably housed the antenna has bent from its foundation, and has completely toppled over. The entire structure was rusted, and trees sprouted out in between the steel frames.

Beside the collapsed antenna were the traces of a building that perhaps served as the control center. It was a square building extending about twenty meters in all directions. It was perhaps once a building with four floors. Only its ruined framework and bits of its outer wall remained. When we tried to take a peek, we only found buried underneath blades of grass some fragments of machines of unknown purpose.

“We haven’t been told if there was more than one, so this must be it.”

“What are we going to do, Master Shizu? Shall we blow up this place?”

“That would be a waste of explosives.”

You bet. This place looked like an ancient ruin.

With the camera, Master Shizu took as much pictures as he can. This kind of camera instantly produces an image without having to develop a film. He took pictures of the entire structure, the building’s interior, the antenna ’s appearance, and so on. To have an estimate of its size, he made Ti stand from place to place and took several pictures with her looking sourly.

“What do you think?” Master Shizu showed the pictures to Ti.

“…”

Ti mutely gazed at the pictures, took one and put it in her pocket.

“Well, I guess one’s good enough.”

After that, just to make sure, Master Shizu climbed a tall tree nearby, and confirmed if there wasn’t anything else around it. He surveyed the forest, but did not spot any similar facilities.

—

“Let’s go back.”

Master Shizu carried the knapsack with the explosives once more, and made our way back. After about an hour of crossing the forest, we got back to the buggy and rode once again underneath the gloomy skies.

“Perhaps the citizens should be relieved from now on, ” Master Shizu said.

—

It was nearly evening when we returned to the police station.

Perhaps due to coordination with the government, other leaders in business suits were all there. In front of the building, the buggy was surrounded, and dozens of journalists with cameras and memos in hand appeared and took pictures one after another. Furthermore, people from the neighborhood who noticed the uproar, men and women of all ages, started to gather. Just as we thought, this has become quite a big deal.

Before everything else, Master Shizu returned the explosives and the detonator to the police.

And then, with everyone’s attention focused on him, he made his report to the chief and the men in business suits.

“Indeed, there was an electromagnetic signal base,” Master Shizu began.

“Oh. Then, what did you do about it?”

He handed out the bundle of pictures to the impatient leaders. The men stared at the photographs.

“But, it’s just as you see in these pictures.”

“So you blew it up after all? But there were lots of explosives left…,” the chief asked.

“No. We did not do anything. —From the rust on the machines, the collapsed trees, and the trees twisting their way through the gaps, you should be able to tell. That base has been destroyed for decades, and possibly, no longer functioning for a long time.”

The pictures fell from the hands of the men. Even the jouranlists surrounding us let out voices of astonishment.

“T-that can’t be!” One of the men wearing suits cried out, but in his hands were the pictures that he picked up. Once more, he looked at the photographs.

“That can’t be!”

He shouted the same words again. Master Shizu continued.

“And so, the people of this country were never ‘ affected by the electromagnetic waves’ to begin with. Until now, those people you believed to have been victims of the electromagnetic waves were, unfortunately , acting out the crimes by their own volition.”

Master Shizu only stated the obvious, but the atmosphere around us changed considerably. The chief was dumbfounded, the men in suits were shaking, and the reporters even forgot to take pictures. Silence befell the onlookers.

“The electromagnetic base has never and will not affect you anymore, so everyone can rel—,” Master Shizu continued with a bright tone, but,

“Lies!”

He was interrupted by the chief’s yell.

“That is not possible! You’re saying that those extremely sorrowful crimes up until now, and even the one that occurred yesterday, were not because of the electromagnetic waves?! That’s not possible!”

One of the men in suits took over.

“That’s right! There’s no one in this country who would do such things on their own accord!”

Voices of agreement arose from the crowd. They came from the journalists, as well as from the onlookers.

“But the electromagnetic signal base was really in such a state,” Master Shizu explained with a worried look, and tried to gain acknowledgement. However,

“I know! These are all forged!”

One of the men in suits proclaimed this with a straight face. The people around us quickly agreed. It seems that it was not questionable to them as to how we were able to fabricate the pictures.

“You…you must be affected by the electromagnetic waves!”

“Yes! That must be it! This man, dog and girl must have come too near the fully-functional base. This means that they were affected even though they were not citizens, and were influenced to come up with this deed! They faked the pictures to try and deceive us!”

I would have liked to ask them what we could possibly gain from doing such a crazy thing. But I knew the answer. It was all the electromagnetic wave’s fault.

Every single human here except for Master Shizu and Ti seemed to have taken this as a fact.

“It’s nothing like that. Please think about it once more, ” Master Shizu said this, now looking a bit shocked. But like the water leaking from a cracked dam, the atmosphere would no longer return to normal.

“We can’t leave these fellows like this for long! Seize these people and animal! We have no choice but to send them immediately to the hospital for isolation!” the police chief announced.

The policemen who heard this order rushed out from the station. Master Shizu can’t possibly fight with the police forces inside the country. Without showing any sign of resistance,

“I am not being influenced,” he stubbornly and calmly proclaimed.

On the other hand, I could slip past the legs of the police and escape, but since Master Shizu would be left behind, it would be useless. I have no other choice. As Master Shizu slowly raised his hands, I stayed by his side without showing any resistance.

Only Ti differed.

In the blink of an eye, she vanished from behind me. When I turned my head to look for her, I saw her tiny form running past beyond the legs of the policemen.

Then she went to the buggy, and just when I was wondering what in the world she’s planning to do there, she grabbed her shoulder bag and started to run away. She nimbly sidestepped a surprised reporter and vanished.

I thought, if it’s Ti then she could get away without any problem. And just when I was thinking what she would do once she escaped,

“Aah! What are you doing?!”

Beyond the journalists, a terrible scream was heard from among the onlookers. It was the high-pitched scream of a young woman.

The policemen, the chief, the rest of the leaders, Master Shizu, and the media, turned to the direction of the scream.

“Stop it! Give it back!”

The shriek came from the same woman. And then, the rows reporters broke up.

And I saw Ti there.

“Ah…,” Master Shizu let out a sigh.

“You! What are you doing?!” the policemen cried out.

With the bag tied up around her, Ti held a baby with her left arm. It was a baby still suckling on a pacifier, a tiny infant. In her right hand, she was gripping a hand grenade. A grenade that greatly resembled a pineapple, a weapon that could kill or wound everyone in its surroundings by scattering shrapnel.

If one looked closely, its pin was already removed. Once Ti lets go of it, the lever that she was holding will come off, and it would not take four seconds for it to explode. So that was the item she always carried in her bag.

If it explodes, Ti, the baby, the policemen and everyone nearby would probably be caught up in it. If it were me, I’d probably be okay as long as I crouch low enough, I thought. Wait, if it slips from Ti’s hand that would be bad. But no, that’s unlikely because she had lots of practice while using it for fishing.

“I will not let you get in our way.”

Those were Ti’s first words for the day.

“…”

The policemen fell silent and eventually tried to talk with the girl. ‘Hey, stop that,’ or ‘Calm down,’ or ‘Stop screwing with us,’ yet they all backed down.

Ti lightly fixed her hold of the child in her left arm, and took one step closer. The policemen drew back.

Sigh

Master Shizu took a deep breath and called out. “Ti, you really shouldn’t be doing that kind of thing.”

“…”

Without responding, Ti briskly approached Master Shizu and I. The police drew back and eventually separated themselves from us.

“Look! That child has been influenced by the electromagnetic waves— She has gone mad!” the chief cried out.

“Whatever. Don’t get in our way.”

“…”

Nothing else followed Ti’s words.

Beyond the lines of the police who retreated,

"Give me back my son!"

The screams of the woman who was being restrained could be heard.

The freed Master Shizu approached Ti, slowly crouched down, and patted the head of the smiling baby. Then he looked back.

"Chief, it's over for us. It seems like we could no longer preserve our will because of the effect of the electromagnetic waves."

Because he said such a thing with a straight face,

Awooo!

Though I was loathe to do it, I gave out a howl like that of a stray dog. It was a mere act, but the chief and everybody else faltered.

"If we stayed here any longer, we don't know what else we would end up doing. At the least, it must be something worse than what that man did yesterday!"

Awooo!

“That’s why we’re leaving. Please don’t stop us!”

Awooo! I wonder if that’s enough.

“Wait! While that may be true, you can’t keep that child hostage!”

“Then let’s have an exchange.”

Master Shizu readily answered and quickly approached the men. Then he grabbed the chief by the collar and dragged him away.

“Eh? Ah? Wait— Someone—”

While being watched by a lot of dumbstruck faces, the chief was dragged in front of Ti. Master Shizu skillfully loosened the chief’s necktie and used it to tie his wrists behind him. He pushed down the back of his knees with his foot, and made him kneel where he stood.

Master Shizu introduced the chief to Ti.

“Ti, this guy’s our new hostage, okay? If he doesn’t obey or if he struggled, drop the grenade inside his shirt. Then go around to his back. All right?”

Ti nodded deeply, “Then we no longer need this child. ”

Master Shizu took the baby from Ti and held it up in his arms. Then he lifted it up in the air two or three times , making the baby laugh.

“I’m really sorry. Please send my apologies to your mother.”

While saying this, he handed the baby to one policeman.

Master Shizu settled in the driver’s seat of the buggy and turned on the engine. He slowly drove it beside the shivering and kneeling chief and Ti who was holding the grenade at his chest.

“Chief, I’ll drive until the walls. Please get in.”

“…”

When the chief only remained silent, Ti pressed the cold grenade beneath his chin, and let out one word.

“Get in.”

“Eek!”

After this shriek, the chief aimlessly stood up and settled on the passenger seat with his hands still tied behind him.

Ti rode on top of him so that they were facing each other. Her right hand that carried the grenade was still pressed in front of the chief’s neck, while she gripped the buggy’s pipe frame with her left hand. Lastly, I rode on top of the luggage beside the hood. It was by no means a comfortable spot, but I have no choice.

“Now everyone, we’ll be leaving. We’ll release the chief once we get out of the gates. Until then, we don’t know what we might end up doing because of the influence of the electromagnetic waves…so please be careful,” Master Shizu said this with a loud voice, and muttered, “Good grief.”

And he launched the buggy.

—

We asked the chief where the nearest gate is, and arrived at the southern gates in no time.

Perhaps they were contacted beforehand, as the gates were open, and the guards only timidly concealed themselves by the side as the buggy passed through the gates.

It was almost sundown. We came out of the now dark country, and rode just far enough so that we would not be targeted by persuaders, and then Master Shizu stopped the buggy.

“I’m sorry, Chief,” Master Shizu apologized to the chief who was now drenched in cold sweat, and asked Ti to give him the grenade. After handing it over,

“Where is the safety pin?”

“I threw it.”

Without any other choice, he tossed it far away. The lever came off in mid-air, and the grenade fell on the ground and exploded without restraint. It dug a hole in the ground.

The chief who got off the buggy sank on the ground where he stood when he heard the explosion. Master Shizu raised his sword and unfastened the chief’s necktie .

“You guys…,” the chief spoke, still seated. If I were to say it, he must be looking at Ti’s direction.

“Don’t you ever come to our country again. Don’t you ever come near it—you madmen— There is no place for people like you who have gone crazy in our country.”

It was the complete opposite of what the chief was trying to do before.

“I understand. We’ll do that…”

Master Shizu said with a somewhat forlorn face. He directed Ti to ride the buggy, and jumped in the buggy together with Ti.

Master Shizu settled on the driver’s seat and faced the chief.

“Just one last thing.”

“What is it?”

“About the electromagnetic signal base…”

“What about it?”

“In the pictures, it looked old and destroyed, but it was still working perfectly like new up to now. It sends out powerful electromagnetic waves. We weren’t affected by it, but all of you are in danger. That includes you and everyone else around you: your loved ones, even your enemies.”

“…”

The chief fell silent. And then,

“Hah! I knew it! We were right!” the chief said delightedly.

Master Shizu continued. “And the output power of the base is at its strongest. As early as tomorrow, its effects will reach the whole country. That includes you, your loved ones, and everybody else. Everyone will lose their minds. In an attempt to take over the country, I lied and told you that the base was destroyed. But I failed.”

“…”

The chief became speechless.

“Goodbye.”

These were the parting words Master Shizu left. Then he turned on the buggy’s engine.

“Let’s go, Ti, Riku. To wherever the next country is.”

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

Upon hearing our replies, he launched off the buggy.

—

The buggy ran through a prairie stained with a madder-red hue.

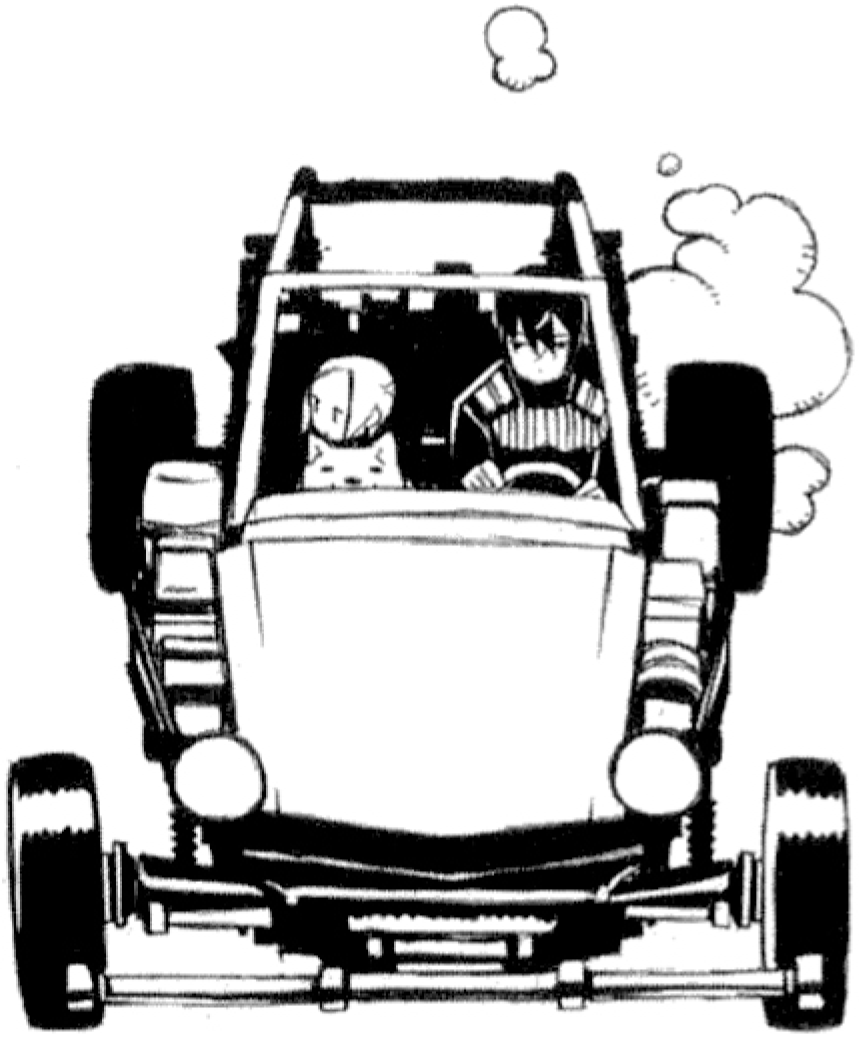
We had no chance to ask if there were any countries nearby. But since there’s a road, we should arrive somewhere.

As Master Shizu drove the buggy, Ti was, as usual, looking around tirelessly.

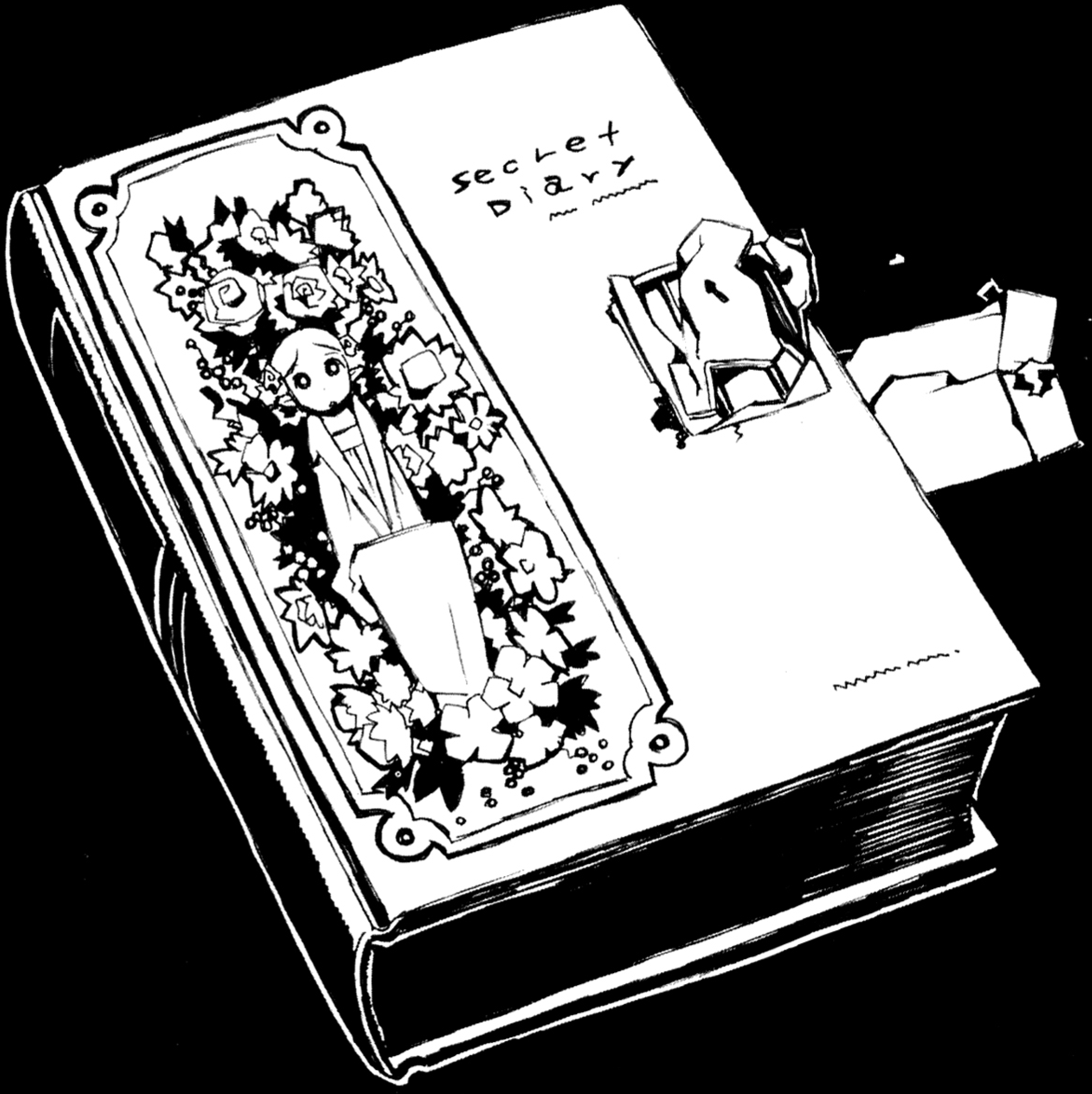
“I wonder how the chief understood your last words, Master Shizu? If nothing happens tomorrow, will they believe that the electromagnetic waves had no effect on them after all?” I asked Master Shizu.

Master Shizu answered. “Who knows? —If only it could be conveyed as easily as electromagnetic waves.”

The buggy ran through a prairie stained with a madder-red hue.



“Land of Diaries” —Historians—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Diary

Chapter Five

“Land of Diaries”

— Historians —

Year 573, Month of Grapes, Day 24
Weather: Clear
Emily Springfield

Something fun happened at school today.

A traveler came to our school. A traveler is a person from another country who is on a journey.

The traveler came to our country the day before. This person met our headmaster by chance, and was invited to come to our school.

When the traveler entered our classroom, we were so surprised. It was because the traveler was still very young, and looks around fifteen years old like my cousin.

At first we thought the traveler was a boy, so we were very surprised when we learned that she was actually an ‘older sister’.

Her name was Kino. She said she goes on a journey with a motorrad, but she can’t take him with her to the classroom.

What impressed me the most is that Miss Kino goes on a journey by herself.

I heard that that there was nobody in between countries. And that it was very dangerous to travel in those places on your own. Miss Kino also told us, ‘There are dangers. You have to get by on your own somehow.’

I thought that I was able to live because I am together with my mother and father in this country.

And so the important thing that I learned is to become fine adults someday and help people in trouble.

Year 573, Month of Grapes, Day 24
Weather: Clear
Gene Schmidt-Rubin

A traveler came to our school. I was so excited.

The traveler wore a cool persuader on her hip. It looked large and heavy. It was deep black and it seemed like a powerful persuader.

For sure, the traveler beats down the bad guys using it. She takes it with her on her journey because traveling is dangerous, obviously.

However, the traveler was so selfish. When I asked her to show me her persuader, she refused and told me that it was dangerous. She didn't let me take a look at it at all.

I know a lot about persuaders from watching movies. I am very good in aiming my toy persuader, 'Super Boom Z', you know.

Even though there are twenty in our class, I am the best. And so, to be told something like 'It's dangerous' is just not right. 'It's wrong,' I thought.

Mother said that it was wrong to be selfish, and often helped distribute bread in the church. I do that too.

If you become selfish when you travel, then I think you shouldn't go on a journey.

Year 573, Month of Grapes, Day 24
Weather: Clear
Carrie Steyr

It took me a long time to eat my breakfast.

There was a surprise at school. A traveler came to observe. A traveler is a person who does not live in a country, and goes on a journey.

Her name is Kino. She was a short-haired person.

On my previous birthday, I told my mother that I wanted to have short hair. My mother told me that girls should have long hair.

I saw that Miss Kino had short hair. I don’t understand why I can’t have short hair.

When I went home I told them. Mother told me that if a girl didn’t have long hair, she couldn’t marry. She also told me that because I’m still a child, I couldn’t marry yet .

Then my mother stroked my hair.

“If your hair is long, it can be tied in many different ways,” Mother said. I think that was the real reason.

But I thought it was unfair that Miss Kino can have short hair. At that time, my father went home from work.

"Long hair is cute, you see," Father said. But I prefer to be cool rather than cute.

Our dinner was gratin. I blew on it because it was hot.

—

"Now, everyone. That was three diaries for yesterday's ' Diary Writing Activity'. Three of you wrote about a traveler coming to class. Your teacher is really happy. —Now then, I will announce which among these diaries is suited for the 'community diary'. For today, teacher has chosen Emily's diary. Everyone, please clap your hands for Emily. —Okay, now everyone. Emily's diary will be copied and distributed, so please paste it on top of your diaries. Paste it well so that it won't come off."

"Teacher!"

"Yes. What is it, Gene?"

“I don’t want to paste somebody else’s diary on mine!”

“What’s that all of a sudden? Everyone in class should be friends. You have to have the same memories as your friends.”

“B-but, I thought so hard about mine! Aren’t we supposed to write how we felt about that person…um, about what happened on that day in our diaries? That’s what you told us, teacher!”

“I did tell you that. That’s not wrong. That’s why everyone in class should leave in their diaries the best memory of all. So that when you read it when you’re adults, you can recall the event, and have fond moments with everyone. It is important to share the same memories with everyone. Why can’t you understand that ?”

“T-then! Can’t I have my own memories?! How a person felt about in the past, there’s no way that would change!”

“… Everyone, in this class, there’s a child who doesn’t listen to teacher. A very, very bad child. It’s a wicked child who insist on his foolish thoughts. Who is it? —Yes, it’s Gene. Gene, you are a very bad child. Everyone, don’t become foolish like Gene. —Gene, stand in the corridor. And please go to the staff room later.”

* * *

Year 625, Month of Nuts, Day 9
Weather: Cloudy
Hans Schmidt-Rubin[2]

Today is a school holiday, so I cleaned up Grandpa’s mementos together with Grandma. Grandma told me, ‘ Thank you for helping.’

There was a diary that Grandpa wrote when he was just a child. He wrote a lot of things.

Among them, Grandpa wrote about the day that a traveler came to their school.

Grandpa was so impressed with the traveler. He wrote , ‘She’s great because she was doing her best on her own.

That’s why I also want to help people.’ He must be very impressed with this person.

Grandpa was such a good person. Grandma said ‘Yes.’

I also want to become like Grandpa.

But Grandpa would sometimes use *‘watashi’* and sometimes *‘boku’*[3]. Sometimes his handwriting would be neat, and at times, dirty. It’s very strange.

The end.

“Land of Nature Conservation” —Let It Be!—

Chapter Six

“Land of Nature Conservation”

— Let It Be! —

A lone car ran in the middle of a wilderness.

This barren land of yellow-brown mountains, sands and stones extended as far as the eye could see. Only the unforgiving glare of the sun could be seen up at the clear blue sky that was completely devoid of clouds.

The solitary thing that made its way through this place while raising a long cloud of dust was a small, filthy, yellow car that looked like it was going to break down at any moment. While its exhaust pipe sputtered black smoke from time to time, it proceeded through the road—if you can call it one—that consisted of small stones mixed with an unknown type of soil. The cracked side mirror looked like it was going to fall off from the car's jolts.

"Is there really a country at the end of this road? Maybe we were fooled by that traveler, Master?" Asked a rather short but handsome young man on the right-hand driver's seat. He gripped the narrow steering wheel with both hands, slightly turning it left and right to run the car in a perfectly straight line.

“There is.” The one who returned this curt answer was a young woman with long, black hair who was seated in the passenger’s seat.

Both of them wore pants and white-collared shirts made of light material. Their collars and sleeves were open.

The woman had a pair of sunglasses on, while the man sported a rather tribal look with the cloth tied on his forehead with a string.

“You seem pretty certain about this…but I’d like to know where that confidence is coming from.”

The woman called Master answered the man’s question with extreme confidence,

“Nowhere.”

—

“But it sure is hot here…Master.”

“You don’t have to point it out,” the woman reproved the man behind the wheels.

As the tiny car rattled on, its form seemed to melt together with the heat’s haze. The sun mercilessly blazed down on the car’s hood, and even the wind blowing in through the window provided no relief.

The man wiped the sweat on his cheeks with the cloth hanging from his head. Meanwhile the sky was reflected on the sunglasses of the woman who remained silent, a serene expression lingering on her face.

“I don’t see a thing… Are we really going to arrive by the end of the day?”

“If not, then we’ll arrive tomorrow. And even if it takes until the day after tomorrow, it’s fine. We should have enough fuel.”

“Well, that’s true…”

The man took a glimpse at the back seat. There were big cans of gasoline lined up haphazardly among their usual travel luggage.

—

Some hours passed, and soon evening was looming over the wasteland. The sun was almost kissing the western horizon, but it was still hot. Just as before, there was nothing in sight except for sand, stones and bare mountains. The car ran earnestly, a long shadow stretching out on its side.

“Master…let’s take a break,” the driver said, his face beginning to show exhaustion.

“Not yet. Let’s go on until the sun has completely set,” the woman answered.

“And I thought we were not in a hurry…”

“If that traveler was telling the truth…it won’t take too much time now.”

The man turned to the woman in the passenger’s seat. “That’s right…but only *if* he told us the truth.”

And then the woman returned his gaze, taking off her sunglasses and showing him a rarely-seen smile.

“…W-what?” The man answered, his heart skipping a beat.

“For now, it’s the truth.”

The woman then quickly shifted back her attention to the front of the car. The man followed her gaze.

“Wow…” An awed voice escaped the man’s lips. “ There really is one…”

Something green appeared on the view before them. The green lump was slowly emerging underneath the horizon. Upon a closer look, it could be recognized as tree leaves and branches.

However, it was a single tree. The fact that it could be discerned as such from this distance only meant that it was an enormous tree. Both its height and girth were big, and its branches spread like an umbrella.

“‘A tree so big, you wouldn’t believe it unless you see it with your own eyes,’ huh? I’m sorry for not believing you, traveler.” As the man apologized to a person who was not there,

“Now, let’s hurry.”

“Roger!” The man answered the woman’s words with a step on the gas. The engine throbbed and the rear wheels kicked off the ground.

Yet the car did not gain any considerable speed.

—

The two arrived at the edge of a lake just when the whole expanse of the sky was stained with a madder red hue. The car stopped near the top of a cliff.

From there, they could see the tree in its entirety. To them, it appeared like a gigantic green umbrella.

The tree was located at the heart of a flat island surrounded by walls of stacked stones. A city was visible within it. As the island itself was vast, the eyes might be tricked to perceive the tree to be of a normal size. However, upon seeing the size of the bricks that made up the high walls, one would realize that the tree was indeed of extraordinary proportions.

The lake surrounding the island was like a sea, so wide and boundless that the opposite bank of the lake could not be seen at all. Continuing beyond the curved edges of the horizon, its calm surface reflected the color of the sky and glittered from the light of the sun.

“It’s wonderful, isn’t it?”

“It sure is a magnificent view.”

The two alighted from the car and upon gazing at the scene, became mesmerized for a while.

After some time, the man switched the lights of the car on and off. Soon a small boat came out from the island and headed to their direction.

The two returned to the car and drove until they arrived at a steep slope at the edge of the lake. Over there was a wharf made of quarried stones.

What greeted them there was a small fishing boat carrying around ten people. It must have served its purpose for quite a long time, judging from the patches that covered its body. Two men who seemed to have just gone from fishing came out of the boat.

After an exchange of greetings, the woman requested entry to go sightseeing in their country, mentioning that their visit was because of the rumors about the gigantic tree.

“That’s wonderful! Please, come and see it,” the men readily agreed.

Since it was not possible to bring the car aboard the boat, it was decided that the two should carry their luggage with them. The car was left in a place that almost no one ever visits, but just to be on the safe side, the man set a trap in it; one that makes bullets fly out from every single corner when someone tries to steal it.

The two became passengers of the boat, and were finally able to cross the lake and land on the island. The sun has already set and the stars were already twinkling on the sky when they passed through the gates.

However, it was pitch black; they could barely see anything.

“Since it’s like this, let’s just set aside everything for tomorrow.”

“That’s a good idea. I’m also quite tired.”

The two stayed at a hotel near the gates, and immediately went to sleep.

The next day.

Amidst the dazzling sunlight, the giant tree could be seen well from the windows of the hotel.

In reality, the tree was an hour’s walk away, but it was so big, it’s as if you could reach its branches just by stretching out your hands through the open windows.

“Amazing. There’s no place in this country where that tree is not visible.”

After breakfast, the two spent the morning walking around and sightseeing along with a guide.

The interior of the country shared the same color as the wilderness. The houses and the streets were all built from quarried stones.

Not a shadow of a car could be seen in the narrow road. There were only carriages pulled by burly horses with dusty feet. The country’s interior was covered with fields and animal barns.

“As you can see, our country was built on this island. According to legend, our ancestors who wandered through the wilderness found this lake, island, and tree, and decided to settle here. There was water, protection from the outside, and the gigantic limbs of the tree could block the intense sunlight. It was a wonderful place. I could only imagine their surprise when they first saw it. —By the way, that tree has no name. We simply call it the ‘tree’.”

“Eh? Why is that?” the man asked, surprised.

“That’s because there’s no other tree growing here, right?” the woman walking beside him answered.

“That’s correct,” the guide agreed.

“I see!” The man, visibly impressed, struck his palm with his fist.

“I’m sure you’ve noticed; only short grasses can grow in this arid wasteland. And they take a long time to grow too. It’s really incredible for a tree of that size to flourish in a place like this. It’s a miracle. We can’t even estimate the age of that tree.”

The guide explained as he walked. His tone was gradually getting feverish.

“Because of that, this tree has become the symbol of our country. It is in everyone’s hearts—in everyone’s souls! We have looked up to this tree from the moment of our birth, and we will do so at our death. We hold dear the shadow made by the sole tree that nature has blessed us with in this scorching land.”

“Oh” or “I see” were the only interjections the two made as they walked behind the guide.

“Nature! Bountiful nature and humans! About a hundred years ago, we made the ‘Nature Conservation Law’ to protect this tree at all costs. Protecting it will protect us! The power rooted in the earth fills our daily lives! Our one and only connection! It has been decided by the heavens! It is only natural to feel this way whenever we see the tree!”

The heated speech of the guide now didn’t make any sense to the two travelers.

“Is that so?” or “Amazing” were the only words the man and the woman could say as they continued to follow after the guide.

Soon the three of them arrived near the tree. It was surrounded by high walls so its trunk couldn’t be seen.

Though they are ‘near’ the tree, there was still a considerable distance that separated the walls from the trunk. But at this point, looking up would treat one to a view of the green leaves. The spread-out, umbrella-like branches would remind one of a mountain.

“Wow… It’s really big…,” the man remarked as he looked up.

“But…we can’t go any further.”

The guide had a sorrowful expression, his tone taking on a stark contrast with his animated mood only moments ago. It was more suitable for a funeral greeting.

“These days, the Nature Conservation Act prohibits people from going beyond these walls. We can no longer take our afternoon naps beneath the sunlight that leaks from its branches.”

“Why?” the man asked.

“Because you fear that it would break or collapse, right?” the woman answered once again.

“That’s correct,” the guide nodded.

“Well then, let me show you what’s beyond these walls.”

The guide walked a few steps along the walls and climbed up a set of stairs. The three of them soon came out into a viewing platform at the top of the walls. From there, they should be able to see the trunk of the tree.

“Oh dear,” the man said the moment he saw.

The trunk of the tree was as thick as a skyscraper, connecting the leaves and branches with the ground. But if one looked closely, it was not a single round trunk of a tree. Rather, it was a bunch of numerous trunks fused together.

But having decayed at several spots, it was full of dark holes. There were tens and hundreds of stones put together to support the branches stretched out on its side. While looking at this tragic spectacle, “How do I put this…it’s injured all over.” The man put his thoughts to words.

“It’s just as you see… The sores in the trunks began to appear several decades ago and haven’t disappeared since. Soon, the frequency of whole branches breaking and falling increased, and now we had to support the branches with pillars. Because of the Nature Conservation Act, as well as for safety reasons, this wall was built and no one was allowed to approach it,” the guide explained miserably.

“If those branches fall, it will be quite terrible,” the man noted.

“Before, there were parks and houses within these walls, that is, under those branches. But a few years ago, a thick branch broke and fell, smashing everything under it. One hundred and twenty five people died.”

“That’s really dreadful.”

“Ever since we discovered those sores, we tried, desperately, to protect the tree in every way possible. However, as matters stand, we could only entrust our luck to heaven.”

"Weren't there any new sprouts?" the man asked, but the guide only shook his head.

"The tree produces plenty of seeds every year, but all of those that fall die. The seeds couldn't possibly anchor their roots into this hard soil. We tried planting them near water and even used them as fertilizer. We've tried a lot of things but none of them worked."

"Then how in the world did this tree sprung up…?" The man asked, genuinely puzzled.

"It's a mystery. And it will be, forever," the guide answered.

"Does it still produce seeds even now?" the woman asked all of a sudden. The surprised guide nodded as he answered the query.

"Eh? Yes. There are still seeds this year."

"Then it will be fine," The woman said, but did not elaborate further on her meaning. The guide only tilted his head.

"You have shown us something very wonderful. Please continue to take care of this tree," the woman said.

“Why, of course!” The guide nodded firmly.

—

The black-haired woman and her partner spent about two days in the country.

While the man lowered his bait into the lake to catch some dinner, the woman spent her time leisurely, reading and doing other things. From time to time they would lift their eyes and see the ever-present tree.

On the morning of the third day, underneath the clear sky, the pair once again rode the rocky boat and returned to site of their car, which was safe and the same as they had left it. The man removed the trap that he set up.

The two expressed their gratitude and parted with the country’s citizens. The small, decrepit car climbed up the hill road and went up again to the cliff where the country could be viewed.

“It’s such a wonderful view, isn’t it?” The man alighted from the car and gazed at the lake, island and tree.

The woman also got off from the car and silently looked at the scenery.

The man and the woman remained standing for a while amidst the morning wind blowing through the wilderness; the enormous tree visible beyond the car flanked in between them.

Eventually, the man broke the silence.

“Master.”

“What is it?”

“That tree will collapse, won’t it?”

“In half a year, most likely.” The woman promptly answered the man’s question in an extremely casual tone . “Just as that traveler said, eventually, even this view will no longer be seen.”

“It’s a pity,” the man said, sincerely regretful.

“But—” the woman began, and the man turned towards her.

“Sprouts will grow out from the collapsed tree.”

“Eh? What do you mean?”

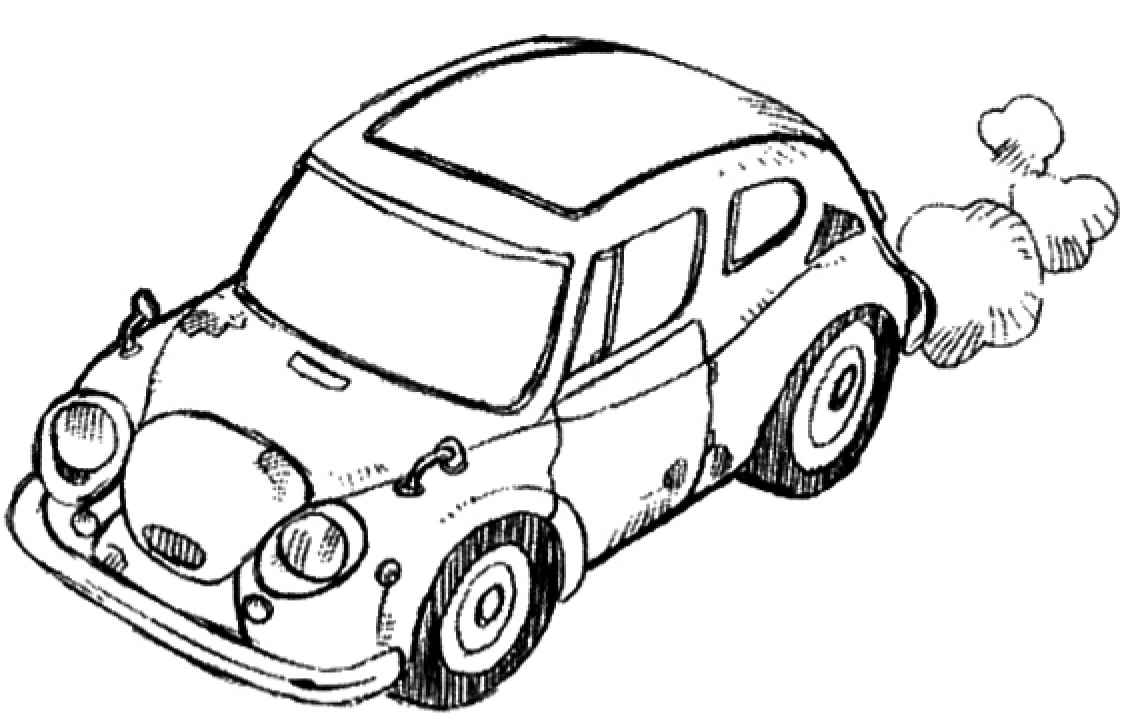
“That tree will fall and eventually decay from the wind and rain, but the sprouts will have a soft spot to grow in, and plenty of nourishment. It will become a perfect seedbed.”

“Ah! I see!”

“It is likely that that tree grow up in that manner as well. The trunks of the trees eventually fused together and formed one, gigantic tree. I don’t know how many hundreds or thousands of years it took, but before long, this cycle will start again.”

“Then it’s fine even if it collapses. The people of that country should just take good care of the tree sprouts. Eventually, the interior of that enclosure will become full of greenery!” The man said with a delighted tone, and the woman nodded.

“But then, maybe that’s something that both of us wouldn’t be able to see.”



* * *

“But then, maybe that’s something that I wouldn’t be able to see.”

“I want to see it! The place where fresh buds are springing from! Someday, I will!”

To the words of an old woman, a little girl exclaimed, her eyes glittering with excitement.

* * *

“Do you remember this story, Hermes? At that time, were you…asleep? Or were you left outside?”

A lone motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly) rode through the wilderness. It was a motorrad loaded with traveling luggage and fuel cans on top of its rear wheel.

“I don’t remember, Kino,” the motorrad called Hermes answered his rider.

The rider called Kino was clad in a brown coat, the excess hem of which was rolled up to her thighs. She wore a brimmed hat with ear flaps, and goggles over her eyes. A bandana to keep out the dust was wrapped around her face.

The motorrad ran beneath the clear noon sky.

"That's why I was so happy when I realized that we're near this country."

"Uh-huh." Then Hermes followed-up his short response, "But there's no doubt that we can no longer see that big tree, right?"

Kino nodded. "But that's okay. What I wanted to see is the scenery that Master and her student *weren't* able to see."

"And by deliberately visiting this kind of place, you're just showing how extremely curious you are, Kino."

"And I chose to come here during the winter. Because of that, we wouldn't have to suffer under the scorching sun like the time they came here."

"Except, we only rode here *after* you learned by chance that this country will be nearby. In short, you're acting on blindsight."

"… Acting on *hindsight?"*

"Yeah, that!" Hermes said and fell silent.

“But guess what, I bought a bag of flower seeds in the previous country.”

“Oh, I didn’t notice.”

“I chose the aquatic type, the kind that blooms while afloat on water. I will offer it to this country’s residents. I thought they’d be delighted if they could grow flowers in water tanks beside the trees.”

“You’ll give it to them? That’s rare of you, Kino.”

“I’ll sell them.”

“Oh. But, you won’t be there to see the trees surrounded by those flowers.”

“That’s okay.”

“Hmm.”

The morning of the next day. Kino and Hermes arrived at a cliff overlooking a lake.

There was the endless expanse of a lake and a single, enormous island.

“It’s just as Master said…”

“But what’s up with that dome?”

Just as Hermes remarked, at the center of the island, that is, at the heart of the country, there was a big dome made of stone.

“I wonder…? The tree should be right there…so maybe they made it into a botanical garden or something?”

“We’ll know once we get there. —Wait, don’t leave me behind, okay?”

Kino switched Hermes’ headlights on and off, sending a signal. Soon a small boat came out from the island and headed to their direction.

—

After taking Hermes on board using a plank, they proceeded to cross the lake.

Upon being handed an entry permit, she rode towards the country. While she unloaded the luggage in her hotel room, she noticed how the dome could be seen very well even from their window.

Kino rode Hermes to the country center. While running through the streets made of stone, the huge dome gradually became higher and higher in view as they neared it.

“Welcome, traveler.”

The guide received Kino and Hermes in a plaza right in front of the dome. Kino dismounted Hermes and looked up at it. It was a pretty impressive structure, made of numerous stones put together with very little gap between them. Tiny skylights can also be seen all over it.

“It’s so big.” Kino voiced her impression.

“Yes! It is our country’s pride!” the guide answered delightedly.

“Can you show us what’s inside?” Hermes asked.

“Of course! It’s our country’s pride! Symbol! Heart and Soul! Spirit! —Over here, please see for yourselves.”

Following the guide, Kino pushed Hermes and passed through the dome’s huge doors.

Using a tiny lamp, they passed the dark corridor and climbed a slightly elevated slope. The guide helped in pushing Hermes up.

The place where the two humans and vehicle arrived at was the viewing platform inside the dome. They could see the expanse of the dome’s interior, but they could not make out what’s in it because of the darkness.

The guide sounded a bell beside him several times. Its gloomy peals resounded inside the dome.

Soon the interior of the dome became brighter. The blinds of the skylights opened one after another, letting thin strips of light shine in.

“Behold!” the guide exclaimed with pride.

“…”

“…”

Kino and Hermes gazed in mute amazement, for what appeared before them was…

A collapsed tree. The thick tree scattered its leaves and branches in all directions. However there was nothing green to see. All there was were trunks and branches gray from dryness. They looked like huge, gray snakes wriggling on top of the brown stones.

“… What…is this?” Kino asked.

“Our country’s soul!” the guide answered.

“I know that already, but what *exactly* is this?”

“Oh. This is a tree that once grew on this place. As there are no other trees in this country, we refer to it simply as the ‘tree’. It’s a very big tree, as you can see. When it still stood, it was even higher than this dome.” The guide explained without hesitation.

“But why is it like this?” Hermes asked.

“Of course! I’ll explain it to you! —It was many decades ago when the tree our ancestors found on this land where they have settled have collapsed after its long life has come to an end. It made us really sad, but we have to protect the tree as decreed by our Nature Conservation Act. So we decided to continue protecting the tree forever!”

“…”

“Uh-huh. And then?”

“We covered the tree with this dome—to protect it against the harsh rays of the sun and wind and rain! It was a very difficult construction project, but it was completed magnificently. With this, no matter how many years pass, the tree will remain as it is, just how it looks now!”

“…”

“I see.”

“Of course, we deeply regret that the life of the tree has come to an end. However, we are glad that we can forever preserve the proof of its existence! No matter how many generations pass, this tree will remain as our symbol for eternity!” The guide spread his arms wide and finished his speech.

Then upon seeing the convoluted expression on Kino’s face, asked hesitantly,

“Is anything the matter, traveler?”

—

The morning of the third day.

“That’s one hell of a country…”

Kino let out a sigh after they bid farewell the boat that transported them back to shore.

“Wasn’t that interesting! For a dome of that size to be constructed using stones without a single pillar, it needed immense architectural skill. It was really impressive! I’m glad we came.”

“Uh-huh,” Kino threw Hermes a sidelong glance, then straightened her hat.

“Kino, what about the seeds?” Hermes asked as Kino straddled him.

“Oh, these…” Kino opened the front of her coat and took out a small paper bag from her jacket’s pocket.

She tore open the bag, and let a number of small seeds roll into her gloved palm.

“I have no need for these anymore…” Kino clenched her hands and glanced at the surface of the lake.

“Oh, you’re going to throw them in the lake?”

“I don’t know if the flowers will bloom, though.”

"But there's no harm in trying."

"Well then—" Kino raised her arms.

"There!"

She threw them with all her strength towards the lake. They scattered, drawing invisible arcs in the air, before dropping and creating ripples on the water's surface.

Soon after, the surface of the water rippled violently.

A group of fish ate all of the seeds.

“Land of Merchants” —Professionals—

Chapter Seven

“Land of Merchants”

— Professionals —

A motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly) was riding through a wilderness in the middle of winter.

It was a barren land of rock solid earth and craggy hills extending in all directions. Occasional chilly gusts form tiny brown whirlwinds. There was not a single drop of moisture in the atmosphere, rendering the skies clear except for the dimly floating sun. The temperature was way below freezing point.

The motorrad proceeded through this abode where not even a pretense of a road could be seen. It had boxes attached on both sides of its rear wheel, the top of which was stacked with a bag, a sleeping bag and cans of fuel and water. To avoid it from freezing, the amount of water in the cans was reduced.

Its rider wore thick winter clothing of brown jacket and trousers on top of her normal clothes. She wore a boa winter cap with flaps that completely hid her cheeks. Her hands were covered with thick gloves, while a scarf was wrapped around her face. The yellow single-lens goggles over her eyes concealed her expression.

A rifle-type persuader (Note: A gun) fitted with a scope was hanging from the front of her body with a leather strap.

“Cold,” the rider mumbled through her scarf.

“Was that the forty-fifth time?” the motorrad answered.

“Cold cold cold cold cold…”

“Okay, okay.”

“… It’s freezing, Hermes.” The rider expounded, and the motorrad called Hermes replied immediately, “That’s what you get for being so nosy, Kino—what with recklessly coming to this kind of place despite knowing it ’s going to be cold.”

“Well, that’s true,” admitted the rider called Kino. The ground that they were running on was jagged with numerous stones, so they rode at a considerably low pace . Hermes continued, “If after keeping up with these conditions, we find out that there’s no country waiting for us, then there’s ‘no gain for our pains’.”

“… Hmm? You got that right.”

“How rude. —More importantly, if that country’s not there and you don’t get fuel, we won’t have enough to cross this wilderness.”

“I know that. That’s why we’re going on with all our might without dawdling around.”

“Hmph. Well if we did, it’d be a waste of fuel.”

“If I knew that there won’t be enough, I would have turned back to the previous country. I was just considering that right now.”

“That would be troublesome.”

“Anyway, pushing forward is a mark of a ‘ professional’ traveler.”

“What’s this about being a professional?” Hermes complained.

“Running properly despite complaints. That’s what it means to be a professional motorrad.”

“Well, that’s true.” Hermes said.

—

The sun has greatly inclined to the west as the early winter evening neared. All over the wilderness, the shadows of the house-sized boulders scattered about extended towards a single direction.

While Kino was busy stitching a path around the stones, Hermes spoke,

“Isn’t it about time to rest? At this point, it’s no longer possible for us to reach that country within the day.”

“Let’s go on a bit more.”

“That’s the sixth time.”

“… Okay, then let’s do this. If we don’t see anything after climbing that hill in front of us, let’s stop.”

“It’s a deal.”

Kino rode Hermes up the stony hill. Just when they reached its peak and the field of vision beyond was about to reveal itself, Hermes yelled.

“Kino! Stop!”

“Ugh!”

Kino quickly hit the brakes as instructed. The rear wheel locked and slid to the side, sending some sand billowing to the air. A truck appeared suddenly from the side of a boulder just right ahead of Hermes.

“Whoa!”

It came in an abrupt halt in front of the dazed Kino, accompanied with a loud braking sound and a cloud of dust. It was a heavy, off-road truck with at least six tires on its side. When Kino looked up at the elevated driver’s seat, she met the wide-opened gaze of a young man who was gripping the steering wheel.

“I’m really sorry, Kino. If you hadn’t noticed and stopped in time, there would be quite a terrible traffic accident out here in the wilderness. If we collided, I couldn’t guarantee that you two—and our truck, for that matter—would walk off with just a scratch. We would be in quite a mess.”

A man in his fifties apologized. He was thin and tall, and he wore a gray, boa-hooded top coat.

“Please don’t worry about it anymore. Besides, you have already treated me to a meal,” Kino answered. The sun has set and the sky was already dim. She still wore her winter clothes as she sat on a folding chair, a cup of steaming tea in her hands. Behind her, Hermes was parked on his center stand.

In front of Kino was an outdoor barbecue grill, its charcoal embers liberating heat and a faint, red glow. There was meat grilling lusciously on a mesh wire placed on top of it.

Seated opposite Kino was the man along with his wife, a woman roughly the same age wearing similar clothing. Parked behind the couple was the truck they almost collided with.

On top of the high loading platform of the truck were two young men who kept guard with rifles in their hands. One of them was the truck driver.

Both men were the merchant’s sons. The stocks of their rifles were made of green fiber-reinforced plastic with big 20-round magazines inside. They were installed with high-magnification scopes for long-range shooting, not unlike the one Kino used.

“Were you also aiming for that country, Miss Kino?” the man said, turning his head to the right. The hilltop they were sitting on overlooks a plain. A big, dark silhouette could be seen in it. It was the mark of a country; the outline of tall, round walls.

And scattered amidst it were artificial lights that shone like stars.

“That’s right. We heard about a small country in the middle of the wilderness and decided to come. —As for you?”

The man nodded with his teacup on his lips. Hermes asked, “What for?”

“A bit late for introductions eh? We’re merchants from a big country far north from here. We trade as a family, me along with my wife and sons. Normally we go back and forth from our country to neighboring ones, but this time, we decided to try doing business in that country.”

There was a hint of surprise in Kino’s face when she heard the man’s answer. She inquired, “From the previous country I visited, I heard that it was a country that almost no one knows of, and that people rarely come there. But how is it that you knew about it in your country?”

The man shook his head. “Just as you heard, it was really a country in a secluded region. It’s possible that I’m the only one who knows about it in our country.”

“Kino must be upset that there are people other than herself going to that country.”

Kino had no trouble ignoring Hermes’ words, and proceeded to ask some more, “Can you tell me how you learned about it?”

“Sure. It’s really quite simple,” the man answered.

“You see, it’s because I was from that country.”

Kino listened to the man’s story while eating her sumptuous dinner.

The man was born in that country. Of course, he believed that he would spend his entire life in it.

But when he reached the age of twenty, he suddenly had the urge to go out of the country, and couldn’t be swayed otherwise. He fled, not listening to the advice of the people around him.

“So it was a ‘valley of death’?”

“… ‘Folly of youth’?”

“Yes, that’s it!” Hermes said and fell silent. The merchant continued,

“There’s no better way of putting it. It was a really rash thing to do. At that time, it wouldn’t have been strange for me to die a dog’s death in the middle of the wasteland.

“And so I wandered around numerous countries until at last I found one in the north that suited me. I immediately became its citizen. I chose to become a merchant that goes back and forth countries, and worked hard. Eventually I got married and had a family, while my business flourished.

“And when I finally reached this age, I resolved to come back to my home country. —My parents must be long gone, and since I have no siblings, I don’t think there’s anyone left there who knows about me. Still, I wanted to show my countrymen that I have become a ‘ professional’ merchant.”

“You don’t mean to give away objects for free to the people in your home country?” Hermes asked, but the man firmly refuted,

“Of course not. I’m a merchant. A merchant’s job is to sell things. I will come back to my birth country as a ‘ professional’ merchant. I plan to sell things properly once I get there.”

“You heard him, Kino. Too bad, but it seems you can’t take part of the blessings,” Hermes said, and Kino slightly looked behind at Hermes and gave him a glare.

“If I were human, I would shrug and give you an unrepentant look,” Hermes countered.

Kino looked back at the man, “I just thought I could get something from that country. Do you have fuel? If we can get our hands on some, we plan to cross the wilderness without retracing our steps. If you plan to sell some of your things in that country, we’ll pay.”

“Oh we have. We can sell some of the truck’s spare fuel. In that case, I’ll reserve some for you, Kino. It’s a promise.”

“That would really help.”

“It’s fine. This is also part of business. —But to tell you the truth, I don’t know how much those people are willing to buy when it comes to foreign items.”

In spite of these words, the man spoke in a delighted tone, and Hermes asked. “Really? Then what if they tell you that they don’t need anything? What if they ask you to hand over the items for free?”

“Then I’ll sell the fuel to you and retreat without hesitation. Realizing when things won’t go well, and quickly shifting your focus, is also a mark of a professional merchant. And I won’t give away the items for free, no matter what they tell me.”

“Hmm.”

“But it’s no use to be impatient. We were hurrying so much today, thinking that we can reach the country before sunset. As a result, we get to enter it tomorrow. The same goes for you.”

“I’m looking forward to tomorrow,” Kino said, and the man nodded happily.

“I’m also excited. —Merchants always get nervous the night before entering a country.”

Kino also nodded.

“It’s the same for travelers.”

—

The next morning, Kino woke up at dawn.

“Ugh—cold.”

Inside her tent, she crawled out of the sleeping bag and put on her winter clothes, winter cap and gloves and went out with the rifle she called ‘Flute’ in her hands.

It was intensely cold and dry. The blue sky was perfectly clear and there were still a number of bright stars left in it. Kino exhaled, letting out a long puff of white air.

When Kino looked at the truck parked nearby, the lone guard sitting on top of the platform wrapped in blankets waved to her.

“Huh?”

Who she thought was the son, was actually the merchant.

Slightly surprised, Kino returned the wave and looked at the other side. At the bottom of the hill was the country, its walls the same color as the ground. Even the closely packed buildings made of stone inside the country shared the same color.

Kino attended to her morning ritual with disinterest. She exercised lightly enough not to break a sweat, and tuned-up Flute. She folded up the tent and wiped her face with a cloth dampened with the water from the water flask that she embraced as she slept.

Kino heated water using solid fuel and carried the cups to the truck. She called out to the merchant, and with Flute on her back, climbed the steps to the platform and handed the cup to the merchant.

“Ah, thanks.”

Kino sat back to back with the merchant and guarded the opposite direction. She put a teabag in her own cup and waited for a while. The merchant took some powdered tea from his pocket and melted it in the hot water. He tasted one or two mouthfuls and drank it with gusto. Steam rose from it.

“I couldn’t sleep, so I exchanged places with my son who was keeping watch. I worked as an assistant for some time when I was still young, so I always kept watch and couldn’t sleep at night. I just remembered the old days,” the merchant said. Kino asked without turning around,

“You’re quite emotional about it after all. Coming home to your birth country, I mean.”

“I don’t get it myself… It was a country I abandoned once. Maybe, I’m actually glad about it? I don’t really understand,” Upon saying so, the merchant let out a slight laugh.

Kino turned around and saw the round walls beyond the merchant’s back.

Soon the sun rose and the merchant’s wife and sons came out from the cabin behind the driver’s seat. All of them ate their breakfast under the clear morning sky. Kino was again treated to a breakfast of boiled vegetables and meat soup.

“You’re the only one having fun, Kino,” Hermes grumbled from behind.

“Eh? —How come you woke up even though nothing’s happened?” Kino asked in surprise.

—

After their meal, the sun has already risen past the horizon. Light swept the flat land from east to west in a moment.

The traveler and the merchants skillfully packed up their things and piled them in their respective vehicles. Kino parked Hermes beside the truck and stood him up on his side stand.

And just when Kino approached the merchant who was checking the tires at the side of the truck,

A dull rumbling sound echoed in the vicinity, becoming louder as if it was getting closer.

"What's that? Thunder?" Just as the merchant spoke, the ground suddenly shook. The earth violently moved sideways.

"Whoa!"

"Ah!"

The merchant and Kino crouched down, and the merchant's wife and sons in the driver's seat clung to the driving handrails with fearful looks on their faces.

"Whoaaaaaaaaa, it's shaaaakiiiingggg." Hermes voice, which had no hint of nervousness at all, quivered in sync with the tremors.

The rumbles and tremors continued for a full ten seconds.

Then it suddenly settled down, as if a switch was turned off. In an instant, the peaceful morning returned.

Kino, still bent down, looked at Hermes.

“Ah, that was a shock,” said Hermes, who, surprisingly, didn’t topple on his side.

As she stood up, Kino looked at the merchant who fell on his back. Both his eyes and his mouth were wide open in shock, and his continuous rough breathing could be heard.

When she turned her gaze to the truck, she saw its passengers frozen with dumbstruck faces. But upon seeing that no one was hurt, she let out a sigh of relief.

“Are you all right?” Kino asked the merchant, whose face was worn out and pale. He shook his head sideways.

“W-what was that just now? What happened?”

“That’s a strong one. About five? Maybe six. But it’s definitely not a seven. That I know.” Hermes said with his usual tone.

“What are you talking about…? What was that…?”

“Uh…,” Kino dithered. Meanwhile, the two sons got down from the truck, carrying their limp mother arm to arm. As soon as they took her to the merchant, the woman who was trembling in fear clung to her husband and began to weep.

“Ah, that was really terrifying—I was scared too. But it ’s all right now.” The merchant consoled his wife for a while. Kino waited, saying nothing.

Eventually the wife somehow managed to calm down and stop crying, and her sons carried her again to the truck.

The merchant, who still did not stand up, looked up at Kino and asked,

“What in the world happened? The ground moved! Did a bomb fall? Or maybe a new kind of weapon? Do you know?”

The flustered merchant asked with an utterly serious expression.

“Um…just one question. Are you aware of the term ‘ earthquake’?” Kino asked with an uncomfortable look on her face.

“‘Earthquake’? What’s that? A massive lightning of some sort? Did one fall nearby?”

“No, that’s not it,” Kino said, and Hermes began to explain from behind.

“It’s a natural phenomenon. The movement of ground due to volcanic activity or changes in the earth’s crust is referred to as an ‘earthquake’. That’s what just happened . There are various magnitudes, and that one earlier was a strong one.”

“What…? The ground moves? Is something like that even possible?”

“It is. I’ve experienced it many times before. In some places, it happens every year that the residents regard it as a normal occurrence. There were even countries that fixed their furniture to the walls so that they won’t collapse from the shaking.”

“There are also places that almost don’t experience it at all. I’m sure it’s pretty rare for one to occur in this region,” Hermes added.

“The ground moving and shaking…? Impossible. It’s unbelievable, but…for sure…” While muttering, the merchant finally got up to his feet and brushed off the dust on his feet and bottom. And then,

“Ah!” He suddenly gave out a tremendous shout.

“Wah!”

Surprised, Kino drew back and looked at the merchant whose gaze was frozen at a particular point. And then she looked behind her,

“Ah…”

And became speechless. At the area at the bottom of the hill, there should have been a country. But it was no longer there.

“So it was destroyed after all,” Hermes said.

There was only a mountain of rubble. The tall walls collapsed, and what was visible from the interior of the walls were all turned into rubble. The brown dust that was borne from the destruction amassed and flowed leeward.

“The country…”

“…”

The merchant and Kino stood in a row, not moving an inch, and stared at the spectacle. Hermes’ voice reached the two.

“It’s perfectly understandable. It’s a region that hardly experiences earthquakes. Both the walls and the houses were made of stone that were merely put together. They probably don’t even know the term ‘earthquake-proof’.”

“No way…”

The merchant was stupefied with surprise, but Hermes continued with neither diffidence nor mercy, “From the looks of it, almost a hundred percent of the buildings were destroyed. Since it’s early in the morning, everyone must be crushed under their roofs. And in this kind of season, all those people trapped there will be dead in a few days from the cold.”

“…”

The merchant stared mutely at the mountain of rubble.

Kino took a glance at the merchant’s profile, looked for a while in front of her, and exhaled once.

When Kino looked towards the direction of the merchant again, she met glances with the merchant. He had a friendly smile on his face.

“Kino.”

“… What is it?”

“Weren’t you planning to sell some items?”

Kino was taken by surprise with this question for a moment before she answered, “Let’s see…I have a dozen brooches of traditional design from a country in the east. ”

“Let me see it.”

As requested, Kino opened the box on the side of Hermes’ rear wheel and took out a small wooden box the size of a book. She opened its lid and showed it to the merchant. Inside it were twelve brooches of detailed craftsmanship, neatly lined up in two rows.

The merchant closed the lid with a snap. “This is nice. You have a good eye for things, Kino. If you give me this, I’ll fill Hermes’ tank and all of those fuel cans. How about it?”

Kino scrutinized the merchant’s smile, and then asked, “Aren’t you going back?”

“No. —Even if I go there, I won’t be able to sell anything.”

“Okay then— I’ll tell you where you can sell those brooches. In exchange, give me a bag of frozen meat.”

“Then it’s a deal.” The merchant offered his right hand .

The two exchanged handshakes, with the mountain of rubble serving as their backdrop.

—

“May we meet again someday.”

The merchant shouted in a voice loud enough that it wouldn’t lose to the truck’s engine.

Looking up at the truck’s driver seat, Kino shouted back while straddled on Hermes, whose engine was also revved up.

“I’ve mentioned this earlier, but—”

“‘Be careful of ‘aftershocks’ and cracks on the ground.’ I know. Thank you for the tip!”

“Yes. Take care, everyone.”

“Thanks for selling us fuel,” Hermes said.

The merchant waved his hand, blared the horn once, and launched the truck. The sons keeping watch on top of the loading platform also waved their hands as the truck proceeded north.

Hidden under the shade of a boulder, Kino waited until the truck was out of sight.

“Shall we go?”

“Let’s go.”

Kino launched Hermes and climbed down the hill to the west.

They rode slowly upon descending to the flat terrain. Eventually, the mountain of rubble to their right became nearer. They passed right beside it, and soon it was behind them. Kino only spared it a glance.

“Now then—” Kino muttered as she looked ahead.

“For the meantime, you made some profit,” Hermes said.

“I guess so.”

The motorrad continued to run through the arid wilderness.

* * *

Amidst the hum of the engine and the relaxed vibration of the suspension.

"Dear," the merchant's wife spoke to her husband seated by her side.

"What is it?" The merchant who was gripping the big steering wheel answered without shifting his gaze from the front.

"Those brooches are pretty rare. Miss Kino wasn't aware that they are worth much more than the fuel and meat she received."

"Yeah. —I didn't tell them, of course," the merchant answered. He released the accelerator, and upon slowing down, turned the wheel to the right.

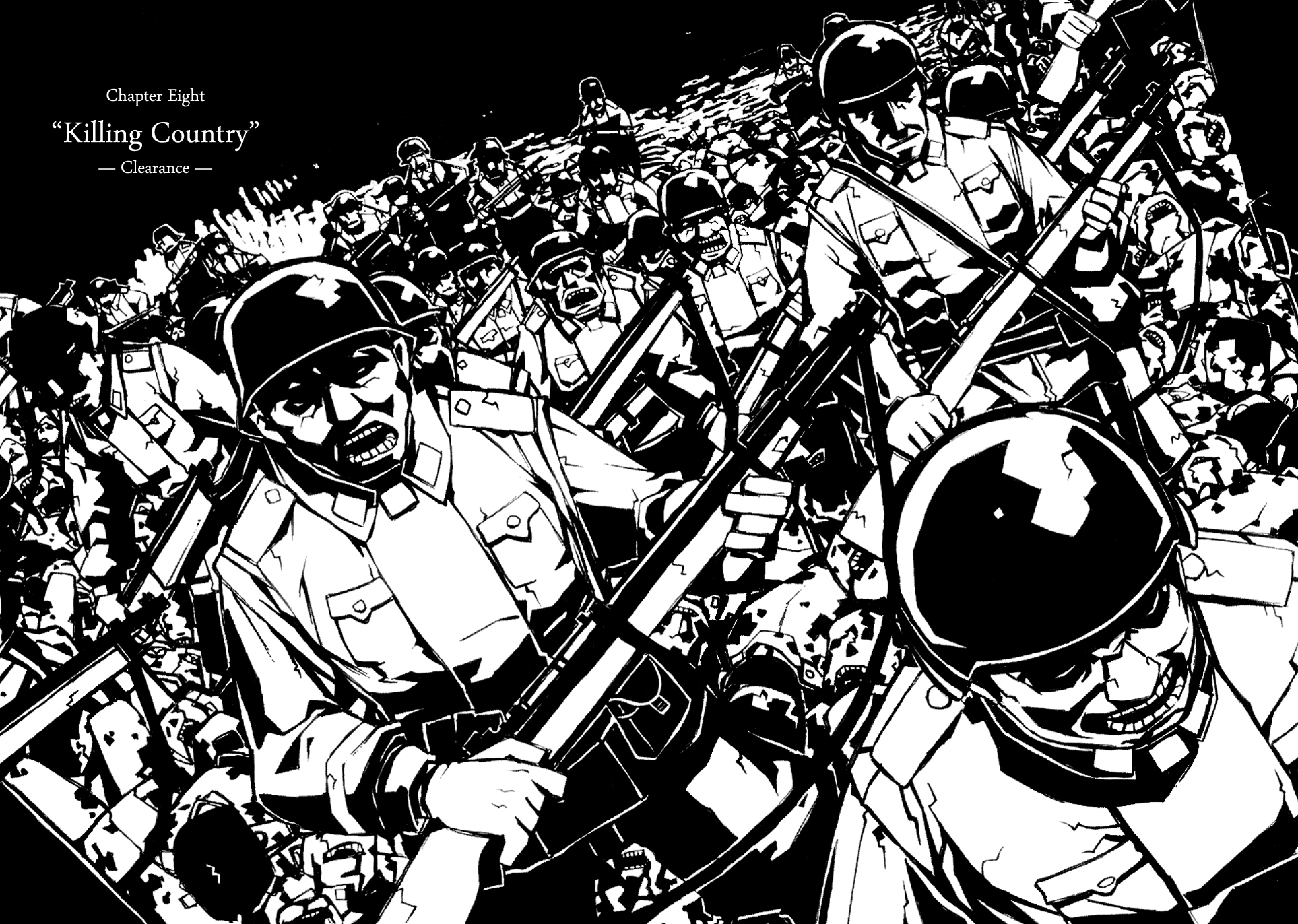
The truck running through the wilderness slowly turned and headed east.

“Killing Country” —Clearance—

Chapter Eight

“Killing Country”

— Clearance —



A lone car was running on a road inside a humid and dense jungle.

However, it was only a road by name, as it was nothing but bare, soppy earth filled with puddles. The thick foliage almost completely blocks the view on either side, and only a portion of the clear sky could be seen amidst the profuse canopy of leaves and branches overhead.

What traversed this path was a tiny, yellow car, so filthy and battered that only a miracle must be keeping it from breaking down. Its rear wheels trudged on, dragging sludge with each turn.

On the right-hand driver's seat was a young, long-haired woman wearing a white shirt and a bandanna around her neck for wiping away her sweat. One would observe a big revolver holster on her right thigh. With her hands on the slender steering wheel, she drove on with no discernable enthusiasm or boredom in her expression.

Meanwhile, the passenger seat was occupied by a slightly short but handsome man wearing a black T-shirt.

“Master…I’m sorry I turned out this way…,” he muttered limply. His face was blue, and beads of sweat formed on his forehead; he looked as if he was about to drop dead at any moment. His seat was slightly inclined, and what served as his pillow was a sleeping bag placed on top of the back seat that was filled with luggage and persuaders (Note: A gun).

“Didn’t you promise not to say that?” the woman called Master replied with a sigh.

“Hahaha… That’s really nice of you, Master,” the man gave out a faint laughter.

“You just shut up and rest,” the woman retorted without looking back at him.

“I’m sorry… It’s my fault that we have to take this detour. If it weren’t for me, we should be on our way to a different country right now…and not in this jungle.”

“Right, I’d prefer that over you whimpering in the passenger seat forever. Besides, if we don’t find out the cause of your condition in the next country, I’m seriously thinking of leaving you behind,” was the woman’s direct answer.

“That’s so cruel…” The man turned to the woman and gave her an imploring look with his ashen face. The woman glanced at him, and with her usual cold tone, “It will be fine as long as we find out.”

“*Sigh…* What an awkward way to die for someone who survived all sorts of persuader fights with wisdom, skill, and bravery, don’t you think?”

“Indeed,” the woman agreed without a second thought.

“… I won’t be able to rest in peace. You know, maybe my soul will not go to heaven and remain in this car as a gho—” The man stopped his joke as he felt a killing intent emanating from the woman, and just let out another sigh.

“Right now, there’s nothing you can do if that really happens to your body. Just think of something else, something happy.” With this, the woman concluded their dialogue.

“A new rifle on sale… Exceptional accuracy… No loading failures…” The man who was already breaking into cold sweat muttered such things with a blank stare while being lulled by the rocking of the car.

—

“I can see the walls,” the woman said.

“Minimal explosive force with the most efficiency…,” the man continued, his gaze fixed on the ceiling. “Huh…?”

He looked ahead. Beyond the windshield soiled with the bodies of crushed insects was a gray wall that marked the end of the road. Yonder, the road climbed the gentle slope of a low hill, on top of which was a small country.

“Oh, I’m saved…,” he said in relief. However,

“Something’s wrong,” the woman said as she slowed down the car.

They soon realized what was strange. They were still quite a distance away from country, but the jungle was decimated.

They have come this far without having a clear view from all directions, yet the car suddenly came into a clearing. The trees have all been cut off, and there was nothing but wide, barren earth from there to the walls. And just as the woman stepped on the brakes,

“W-w-w-w-w-w-who are you?!”

The car was surrounded by a group of young soldiers, faces twisted in fear, and rifles trained on them.

* * *

“Our apologies, traveler. Their commanding officer accidentally went through a different passage, so those young soldiers have been really impolite to you.”

Inside a wooden building in the country, the woman was seated among several men around a table at the center of a room. It was nearly evening, and the gentle rays of the sun filtered in through the window while a ceiling fan quietly gyrated above them. All of the middle-aged men, who wore thin, short-sleeved shirts patterned with warm earthy colors, had their heads hung low before the woman.

“Let’s put that behind us, Chief. Please don’t worry about it.” The woman addressed the man at the head of the table, and expressed her gratitude for having her companion sent to the hospital.

“Ah, that was nothing.” He continued, “It may be an extreme case of food poisoning. But he would be completely recovered after a few days of rest and intravenous nourishment.”

“That’s good,” the woman replied with no hint of relief or gladness.

“Even so, you couldn’t have come at a worse time.” The chief’s face contorted in grief.

“Say, does that have anything to do with clearing the land on the perimeter of the country?”

“Yes.” The men nodded in unison.

“That doesn’t look like anything other than a rushed construction of a defensive encampment.”

“It’s exactly as you say.” The men exchanged glances, then the chief revealed,

“The day after tomorrow, this country will become a battlefield.”

—

When the woman asked about their situation, the chief invited her out to the top of the walls, now beautifully flooded by the light of the setting sun. It was overlooking the grounds where the citizens were still hard at work even though it was almost evening.

Twelve days ago, a messenger from a distant land they never heard before arrived in their country. Without so much as a greeting, the messenger proclaimed a one-sided declaration of war: *“Fourteen days from now, we will invade this country at the rising of the sun.”* He then took his leave without even drinking his tea, and left the citizens in shock and confusion.

The small country became filled with activity. Even though they have an army, they knew nothing about war . They have a few soldiers, but even if the rest of the men were to be mobilized, they could only help with the preparations as there weren’t enough rifles for everybody. They worked desperately, dreading the fate of their women and children if the defenses were breached.

Three days ago, they received a report from their scouts that trucks and carriages carrying roughly a thousand enemy soldiers were approaching from the northern pass. It seemed that they didn’t have tanks or cannons. Upon observing this, they proposed negotiations once the enemy entered their field of vision, but they were ignored. It finally dawned on them that their only choice left was to fight to protect their lives and their country.

Fearing that the country would be infiltrated using the jungle surrounding it, they cleared the forest and built trenches and fences in a hurry. That is when they spotted the shabby car and became suspicious of its passengers.

“That is why it is in your best interests to leave this country right away. If we lose, it will be the end of this country. The men will be killed, and the women and children will most likely be sold off as slaves.”

The woman gazed at the citizens who desperately continued digging holes, and pondered for a while. Then she asked,

“If I were to help you, how much will you pay me?”

“Commanding three hundred soldiers?! Ambushing advancing troops outside the walls?! And three hundred pieces of gold coins as compensation?!”

The one who exclaimed in excitement, as if he had enough strength to jump out of the bed, was no other than the man, now wearing thin blue pajamas and occupying a room inside the hospital. His complexion looked much better, but an intravenous drip still hung from his arm. The view outside the window revealed that it was already evening, but the pounding of hammers beyond the walls was still very much audible.

“You should sleep. —By the way, let me borrow one of your persuaders,” the woman said.

“By all means!” the man said, delight painted all over his face. Then, “How could I miss such an exciting event? I’d prefer to die over there than through food poisoning …”

“You shouldn’t be thinking about death when this country’s citizens are working hard to survive, you know .”

“I’m sorry,” the man apologized then grinned and lowered his voice. “But Master…you volunteered to be in the front lines not only because of the reward, but also because, if by any chance that this country should fall, it will be easier to escape by yourself if you’re outside the walls, am I wrong?”

The woman nodded quickly. “It would be nice if you could move by the day after tomorrow, too.”

“Right…” The man sighed then looked up curiously at the woman. “But!”

“But?”

“We ate the same stuff, but why am I the only one who got sick?”

“Who knows?”

—

The next day, the female traveler busied herself.

She sported the country’s green combat uniform, with the borrowed 9-mm hand persuader adorning her waist belt. It was a toggle-action type, with eight rounds in one load. Upon gathering her long hair above her nape and wearing the matching cap above it, she looked just like a commanding officer of this country.

First, she directed the work outside the walls, altering it into a more effective base.

Once the whole country was completely surrounded by the fences, she ordered them to construct a wide passageway, around thirty meters across. They made sure that it will be the only entrance to the country, and to make the enemy soldiers concentrate on this passageway, they dug a deep ditch and set traps around the fences.

After this, they narrowed down the middle of the passageway to block the stream of rushing soldiers, and dug multiple layers of trenches from this area up to the walls. This ground and the top of the walls will be lined up with soldiers.

And then, the woman trained the three hundred soldiers under her command.

The only weapons the soldiers had were hand persuaders and rapid-fire automatic rifles that fired ten rounds with one pull of the trigger. There were so few of these that the woman had them prepare persuaders used for hunting, and modified them by cutting short the barrels and stocks. She gave these to the soldiers with muscular builds. Meanwhile, soldiers who were not physically strong but have superb marksmanship, were given rifles with scopes and assigned to the top of the walls to serve as snipers.

Then she divided the soldiers into pairs, and drilled them on various tactics such as covering for a partner who ran out of ammo as well as support protocol for the soldiers retreating to the trenches. It was decided that she would be firing smoke signals to indicate change in strategies, and made everyone memorize by heart the signals corresponding to particular smoke colors.

At first, the soldiers muttered disapprovingly, ‘Do they expect us to obey some outsider woman?’ However, upon observing the woman’s brimming confidence and sound supervision, their doubts turned into motivation, and saw the possibility of survival in following the woman’s orders.

All the while, the man in the hospital whined. “I’m already fine! I’m really okay now, so let me help!”

He would stand up but would stagger and lose strength. The doctors and nurses would then pick him up and return him to bed.

Soon it was evening.

And the coming of the night means the next day will soon begin.

Morning came.

Before sunrise, amidst the morning mist hanging over the jungle, the soldiers embraced their family and friends and set off outside the castle gates with their rifles. Clenching their bullet-filled bags, they entered the trenches together with the partners with whom they will be sharing life or death.

The snipers were prostrate on top of the walls, setting up their rifles and scopes. There were women and children beside them in charge of the spare magazines.

Meanwhile, the woman stood at the front lines together with her hand-picked partner.

The scout came out in a panic from the jungle while shouting the password. He announced that a large troop of enemy soldiers was approaching the country. The tension rose at once.

At last the time has come. The deep red sun rose in the cloudless sky.

“They’re here!” someone shouted. The jungle shook and rustled, and a group of humans appeared. They couldn’t tell how many there are, just the fact that they number more than the soldiers lying in wait with their rifles. Beyond the fences and the passageway, they could see a swarm of people coming out one horde after another.

Amidst the people shivering in anxiety and fear,

“…?”

The woman stood while holding the binoculars in one hand with a bewildered look on her face. She’s not the type who shows her expression, but this time her face conveyed utmost curiosity.

And the reason for this was the scene presented to her by the perfectly circular view of her binoculars—people who by no means could be called soldiers, but ordinary people clad in normal clothes. Their age and gender was diverse. There were men in business suits, boys in school uniforms, old men, and even ten-year-old girls.

All of them had filthy clothes and faces—an indication of their long journey. What they held in their hands were not persuaders or grenades, but primitive weapons like knives, cleavers, and bludgeons. The glint in their eyes was accompanied by their constant rough breathing. It was a rather eerie sight to behold.

“What a shock.” The woman revealed her honest impressions, while the soldiers who were similarly holding binoculars asked what they are to do.

“One way or the other—we’ll have to annihilate them. ”

Then the woman took out the persuader for firing signals and selected the appropriate bullet. She fired it into the air, and a purple smoke soared to the sky.

‘Purple? Purple is it?’ The soldiers looked at each other in confusion, for the purple signal meant: ‘The enemy is withdrawing. You don’t have to conceal yourselves. Aim carefully, make sure not to waste bullets and annihilate the enemy completely.’

In reality, the soldiers had no time to contemplate. In the time it took for them to absorb the meaning of the color, the enemy issued out a war cry and began to charge, as if the purple smoke was a signal for them to attack. As expected, they rushed into the fenceless passageway.

Hundreds of them attempted to cross over; hundreds of grimy bodies in a simultaneous assault. The tremors resonated beyond the trenches, reaching even the center of the country.

The next sound heard was the synchronous firing of over a hundred persuaders. The soldiers who warily exposed their faces and rifles from the trenches need not aim carefully—all they needed was to aim straight towards the mob before them, and let the bullets loose.

A spray of blood sprung forth from the fore of the incoming wave of people. The humans collapsed, and the ones behind them tripped and fell over their bodies. A second barrage followed. More people fell, but the rush of humans did not stop. They stepped on the bodies of their fallen comrades and pressed on towards the walls.

The state of affairs soon went to extremes. The enemy continued to charge, flooding into the passageway without a moment’s thought. The soldiers defending it fired again and again, the continuous sounds akin to the hum of the bullets during their practice. Projectiles also rained incessantly from the top of the walls. Corpse piled upon corpse between the jungle and the country, the earth beneath becoming redder with each second.

—

The scopes of the snipers at the top of the walls reflected the smiling faces of the people plunging into chaos.

“Damn… If you come any closer I’ll shoot…”

Yet they ended up firing their weapons. The humans at the receiving end collapsed with frenzied expressions.

The rest paid no mind to the dead all around, and were soon shot down one after the other, their faces as radiant as those who had gone before them.

"W-what the hell… Aren't they afraid to die…?" A soldier muttered, his face ready to cry.

"Once you start having such thoughts, you'll lose. Just relax, okay?"

The one who uttered such words stood nearby, wearing blue pajamas and hospital slippers, and hair in utter disarray. It was a slightly short but handsome young man who carried a rifle on his back. A metal stand with an IV drip hanging from it was propped beside him.

Amidst the appalled gazes of the soldiers around him, he sat next to the walls with the needle still pierced in his left arm, and gazed down at the advancing crowd and the soldiers keeping them back with gunfire.

"Now then, how are things around here…?" The man looked from right to left as he muttered. He saw the multitude coming from the morning sun's direction, rushing earnestly towards the passageway with their crude weapons. No one approached the tall fences. There were also snipers assigned to guard those areas, but they’re yet to fire a single bullet.

“Strange… Are these guys really serious about this war…? Well, makes things easier…”

The man positioned his rifle, moved the bolt and loaded a round. Through the scope, he turned towards a group of smiling boys in their early teens.

“I pray that you keep those happy faces in the afterworld.”

And he squeezed the trigger with neither restraint nor mercy.

—

Steam rose from the overheated barrels of the rifles.

The soldiers in the dugouts pounded away continuously, pausing only to reload. Before them lay what looked like a carpet made of hundreds of corpses, and the humans who walked over it with smiles on their faces.

From time to time, a few would be able to slip through the storm of bullets and approach the nearest trench. These heroes would be showered with bullets, their bodies turning into honeycombs and their limbs disconnected from their torsos. Just before their death, they would throw their tiny knives that would spin in the air and fall and pierce the damp earth without reaching their mark.

What sounded like high-pitched cheers resonated in the midst of the nonstop gunfire, belonging without doubt to a group of girls in their mid-teens. Around twenty of them lurched in, hands firmly connected with each other. Upon closer inspection, their wrists were tightly bound by strings. They were dirty, but it was plain to see that they wore matching uniforms.

They clambered up the mountain of corpses, staining their feet deep red with the blood of others. They pressed on with smiles on their faces, as if they’re off to meet their loved ones.

“What are you doing! Fire!” A soldier who was in the middle of changing his magazine yelled at his partner. The middle-aged man shook his head.

“No… I have a daughter about their age…”

“They’re enemies! You’ll get killed if you don’t kill them first!”

“T-they’re not carrying any weapons…”

“Fool! What if their bodies were strapped with bombs?!”

The soldier aimed at them as soon as he finished reloading, but a torrent of bullets coming from the top of the walls got to the girls first. Some of them were hit in the head, collapsing as their brains scattered about. The uninjured ones were dragged down because of their linked hands. Yet one of them tried to stand up.

“Die!”

The soldier let out two shots, and the quivering head over her shoulders was soon no more.

“It’s about time to alternate.”

Since the battle, or more precisely, one-sided slaughter began, the woman only stood gazing at its progress through her binoculars. After muttering softly, she fired a red signal.

The red smoke was a signal to swap with the soldiers at the front trench. The soldiers at the back who held fire until then stood up all at once and advanced.

“What does the red smoke mean again? I heard it last night, but I forgot,” the man in pajamas asked.

“The rows will exchange places, so we have to provide covering fire!”

The soldier next to him shouted out. But it was drowned by the intense gunfire.

Under the protective rain of bullets from the walls, the soldiers exhausted from firing retreated to the rear. Some of them showed symptoms of shock, and was pulled down to the ground by their companions.

The new batch of soldiers entered the trenches and began pounding away. The humans that served as their targets were killed one after the other, their bodies stopping and collapsing as they were blown off.

“This is nothing but a massacre!” A young soldier who has just finished providing support fire angrily noted.

“Of course it is, when you’re fighting to win. Well, your other choice is to lose,” the man in pajamas answered quickly, then suddenly acted as if he was in pain. “Ouch…”

“No way! Were you shot?” The soldiers around looked at him anxiously.

“Nope, the needle in my arm got displaced… It’s really painful.” The soldiers’ gazes suddenly turned icy from the man’s answer, and one of them barked,

“… You should go back to the hospital!”

—

Within the country, the people in the shelters who shivered in fear had no news of the situation outside except for the muffled echoes of the gunshots.

The barrages they thought would continue for eternity eventually died down to a trickle.

And soon, it could no longer be heard.

They looked at each other, seeking explanation in each other’s faces. And then,

“We won!” A young messenger boy hopped in and shouted.

They thought it would last the whole day, but the sun was barely above the horizon, and it was not yet even time for breakfast.

—

As there is nothing left of our forces, we recognize our defeat.

Only those words were written on a piece of paper.

After the waves of people marching forward with crazy smiles on their faces had vanished, a truce-bearer wearing a proper military uniform came forward waving a white flag and bearing an envelope containing nothing but this paper. Then the truce-bearer skipped away from the dumbfounded chief, just as clueless as everyone else around him.

The eyes of the tired soldiers reflected the glittering, empty magazines bathed by the morning sunlight, and the mountain of corpses already being pecked at by a swarm of flies.

Amidst it, a fair number of people who are yet to die from their fatal wounds stirred about. They merely groaned, their allies having made no effort to save them.

“I’ll take care of things from here.”

The woman fired at their heads, freeing them from their misery. She changed the magazine of her hand persuader and continued to shoot. At the same time, she looked, but found no one who could still be saved.

After all is over, the citizens realized that not a single person was killed from their side. The casualties were: one person who was accidentally shot by friendly fire on his foot; two persons who broke their collarbones from rifle recoil; five soldiers who fainted from shock and fear; and,

One male traveler suffering from stomachache who was dragged back to bed by his fuming doctor.

—

As the war has come to an end, the cleaning began.

They dug an enormous hole near the country and put inside coal, firewood, fuel, and every single combustible item they could spare. And in this hole, they cremated the corpses. Meanwhile, the carcasses left in the jungle decayed quickly; though not half a day has passed, the bodies torn to bits by bullets were in a cruel state by the time they were recovered.

At first, the soldiers who fought at the front lines were sent to work on the retrieval of bodies, but some of them couldn’t bear the stench and fell sick one after the other, so the women in the country were mobilized in their place.

As they picked up the corpse of a thirty-year old man, fighting the odor with masks,

“These people must have families like us. Maybe they would have wanted to live longer…,” a middle-aged soldier mumbled. At that moment, tears rolled down from his eyes and moistened his mask.

Meanwhile, the female traveler who was still dressed in her military uniform carried on with the task indifferently. She took the corpse from the man’s hands, carried it back to the stretcher by the side, and placed it on top of the corpse of a child.

After sobbing for a while, the soldier turned to the woman, “If by any chance you get to drop by in this country, please ask them the reason… The reason why this many lives should all go to waste.”

The woman nodded, “But it might be better for us not to know.”

“That may be true…but whatever the reason may be, no country would send its people to such a meaningless death.”

“Whatever the reason may be?”

“Whatever the reason may be.”

“…I’ll hear them out anyway,” the woman said, and returned to work.

On the evening of the next day, they finally finished clearing the surroundings of the country of corpses.

The body count exceeded three thousand.

—

“I don’t know the reason for that war, but thanks to it, we earned some easy money. What’s more, the hospital expenses were all free. Isn’t it great that we came to that country, Master?”

The complexion of the man has completely returned to normal. He merrily gripped the steering wheel of the small, yellow car. The woman sat composedly on the passenger seat.

Two days have passed since the war. They were given a grand sendoff from the country after the woman received her reward and the man has fully recovered from his condition. They rode through the jungle road under the clear morning sky.

“Now, where shall we go, Master?”

“Please head north.”

“Huh? Is there anything there?”

“No. But let’s head north for now.”

“If that’s what you say.”

And so the man chose north when they arrived at a fork in the road. The car proceeded shakily on the path that was as bad as ever.

That evening, they caught up to a group of carriages. On the narrow road, the empty carriages were connected like a string of beads.

“Master, these guys are…”

“No doubt. I wanted to ask them something.”

Mingled shock and curiosity appeared on the man’s face.

“But—”

“It will be fine.”

The man reluctantly blew the car’s horn and quickly passed each carriage and made it to the front.

Before long, they saw a soldier on horseback at the lead of the line of carriages. It was a man who seemed to be in his fifties. He wore a military uniform and a tall army cap, a persuader holster on his right hip, and a saber on his left. The rest of the people in this group were mostly coachmen, and no one else was dressed in military clothes.

When he saw the travelers, he gave them a refined salute with his right hand. Then he stopped his horse, bringing the queue of carriages to a halt.

"Let's rest for a while," the soldier instructed the coachmen and dismounted from his horse. The two alighted from their car, approached the soldier and exchanged customary greetings with him.

The three began to chat while they stood, but after a while, the woman suddenly veered off from small talk.

"By the way, we visited a country a bit south from here—" she started. "It appears that this country was forced into an unexpected war just the other day. They had a hard time it seems, but they were able to repel the enemies somehow."

"Oh, that was our doing."

The man, who tried but failed to tell the woman earlier that they might not be told the truth, was truly shocked with the soldier's blunt reply.

"And so…you are now heading back to your country in those carriages?"

"Indeed. Everybody's dead after all. —The truck units must have arrived home by now. Horses are really much slower. I myself prefer riding on horseback rather than the jolting of trucks, so I volunteered to command the carriage units."

Having no interest in the soldier's personal preferences, the man decided to get straight to the point. "That attack…we heard from the citizens that the soldiers rushed in as if they wanted to get killed. What kind of strategy is that?"

"We don't have a strategy!" The soldier answered immediately. And with his calm expression, he continued with a candid tone, "That assault was for them to get killed."

"What?" The man, who thought his ears were deceiving him, asked again.

Without looking offended, the soldier repeated his words. *It was an assault for them to get killed.*

“That is, in order to have them killed, you declared a war on another country, and because it was in the name of self-defense, they would not feel any guilt over it,” the woman clarified.

“Correct. You’re pretty smart, lady.”

“Uh…, but why?”

“Why, it’s because they wanted to die.” The soldier’s answer was too direct, it made it even harder to comprehend his words.

“And the reason why you intentionally took the people who wanted to die with you is?” the woman asked.

“Ah, that’s because suicide is illegal in our country.”

“Suicide? Then those people…wanted to die? Well, they *sure* look like it…”

“That’s right. Our country is large in terms of both population and territory. Everyone lives in abundance, and the average life span is long. Yet year after year, many people give up on their lives. It has been a terrible concern. Some of them would leap in front of trains and throw the schedule in disarray. Some would climb buildings and imitate birds, but would end up like crushed toads on the streets. Others would park a borrowed car in their backyards and breathe in the exhaust fumes. There are also those who would drink bottles of sleeping pills, bathe in gasoline and set themselves ablaze, or drown themselves in lakes. In any case, they would always come up with deeds that become a great nuisance to everyone else.”

“I see.”

“O…kay…”

“And so our country took measures to prevent people from committing suicide. We have tried many things.”

“Of course, it’s the end for anyone once they die. Were there any preventive measures that worked?”

“Well that’s right, so we threatened them with rules like: ‘The corpses of those who committed suicide will be made into dog food,’ or ‘If your suicide failed, you will be paraded all over town,’ and so on. There was a time when we added the rule that the family members of a person who commits suicide will be sentenced to life imprisonment, and the suicide rates did drop by five percent then.”

“…”

The man fell silent with a queasy look on his face.

“But nothing worked in the end, so we revoked all of the rules and adopted a final measure. If they wanted to die so much, the country will give them a place to die.”

“Go on.”

“And so we created a new office, the ‘National Suicide Management Center’. We will provide a means for the people who wanted to die, and guide them so that they need not commit acts that will cause inconvenience to others.”

The man had a big question mark drawn on his face. “ Huh? Isn’t it because suicide is bad that you wanted to stop them?”

“I didn’t say that. We don’t mind if the people wanted to die, it’s just that their methods are such an annoyance. ”

"Oh…"

"So now they can have their intention to commit suicide confirmed in the 'National Suicide Management Center', and have their names registered in our 'Suicide List'. Only then could they participate in our semiannual suicide exercises. Whether they choose to bid their families and friends farewell or not, they would depart to die. Afterwards, we would go to a country far away, proclaim war, and pretend to attack and head to the walls. Everyone would advance forward in earnest. Perhaps it was mass psychology that made it possible for them to face their deaths without fear, don't you think? After that, the cleanup of the corpses will be done by other people, so we get to relax."

"I see. I get it now," the woman answered. Seemingly pleased, the soldier continued,

"But the tough part is choosing a suitable 'killing country'. Before, we would periodically go to war with a particular country, but eventually they just surrender. So we looked for a different one, but they recognized that it was nothing but a suicidal attempt. All of our candidates became prisoners of war and underwent counseling. It was a big failure in our part. That country just now has been chosen by dice, but it was a huge success. The thing I fear most is for us to ‘win’ the war, but it seems that even though that country had little war potential, they could protect themselves when the right time comes. That was quite some strategy. We’ll probably use that country for several years. I’ll write a report about it once I get home,” the soldier said with a rather satisfied look, and continued. “This method is quite effective. If you go to other countries, well not to countries near this one, please tell them about this magnificent solution to suicide problems.”

“I’ll consider it. —Everything makes sense now. Thank you for telling us.”

“Ah no, it’s my pleasure.”

While the woman and the soldier expressed their gratitude to each other, the man still had a disgruntled look on his face.

“But I don’t understand the feelings of those people who wanted to die… Why, life is so much fun.”

“I don’t understand it either,” the soldier agreed immediately and elaborated, “I don’t understand why they would gladly come to that center. And why they would make such happy faces the moment their applications get approved…” The soldier looked down, the brim of his hat concealing his somewhat melancholic expression. “For me, and for you two as well, we could always use our persuaders if ever we wanted to die. All we have to do is to press it on our temples and pull the trigger. Just one shot, and that’s it. But I won’t do such a thing. There’s a reason to stay alive, to enjoy life.”

“That’s right,” the man agreed while the woman only kept silent.

“If you have a reason to live, you will live. It’s only natural. At the same time, if you don’t have any reason to live, you die. That may also sound natural, but I don’t really understand how there could be no reason. I mean, it’s just like you said earlier, traveler. There are so many fun things to do while you are alive.”

“You bet.”

“But those people have a certain radiance about them. Their faces and eyes. You wouldn’t think those eyes belonged to someone about to die. Once the suicide is approved, they would have this strange happiness about them, even though they came to the center looking no better than a corpse. After a person was told, ‘You will die three months from now,’ it was as if they got released from all of their burden and became refreshed, shouting things like ‘I don’t have to work or study anymore!’ or ‘I’ m so glad! I can finally say goodbye to this self!’ During our migration, they would happily talk to each other about death. Not a few of them would say, ‘Watch my beautiful death!’ or ‘Hey soldier, how about joining us?’ Whenever they tell me such things, I get really confounded. I couldn’t understand them at all…

“As you can see, I’m nothing but a lowly soldier. At this age, it would be impossible for me to get promoted, and I wouldn’t become a general even if I die in action. It ’s really embarrassing, but my wife left me for a younger man because she thought I have no hope of getting ahead . She won’t even let my children speak my name. Even so , I never once thought of dying. Living is wonderful. But it’s not that life is all fun, as there are painful times too. However, I believe that having a ‘reason for living’ is in itself more rewarding than being alive. So personally, I don’t understand the feelings of those people who choose to die.”

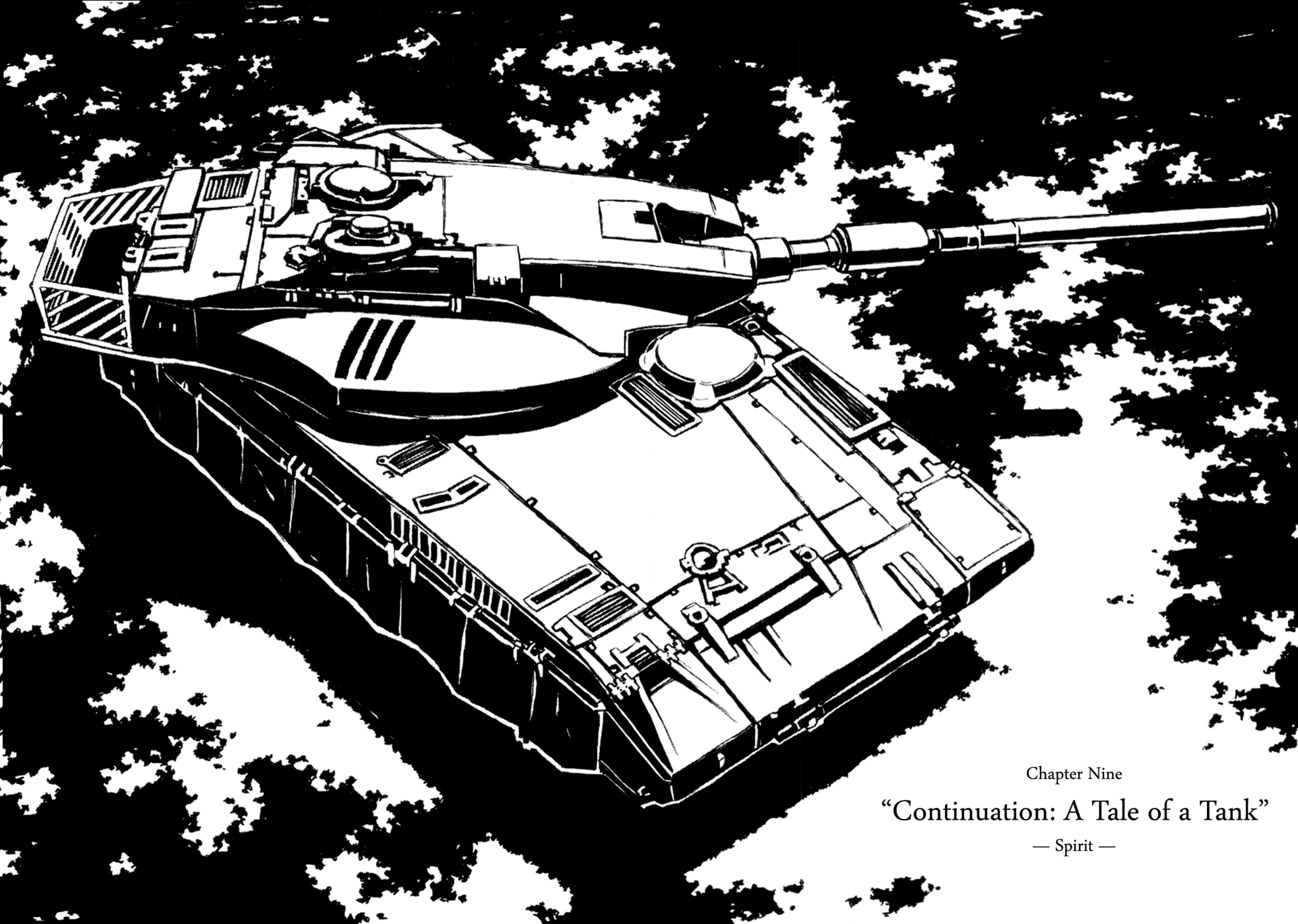
The man became rather pleased with the soldier’s bolstering words. He nodded again and again. “I totally understand,” he agreed. “I was somewhat reluctant to begin my journey, but now it’s my reason for living. I just can’t get enough of it!” he answered animatedly. Meanwhile, the woman remained as expressionless as ever.

Then the man asked. “Mister, mind telling us your reason for living? Is it eating delicious food to your heart’ s content? Or maybe immersing yourself in the world of your favorite book?”

The soldier lifted his face, “That is…!” He was a bit embarrassed, but his face was soon filled with delight and answered,

“I *love* to see the unsightly demise of those suicidal fellows!”

“Continuation: A Tale of a Tank” —Spirit—[4]



Chapter Nine

“Continuation: A Tale of a Tank”

— Spirit —

So it was something like that, huh?”

“Yeah. But—”

Kino and Hermes stared at the back of the floating tank.

They stared at the back of the tank until it can no longer be seen; a black tank, with three red vertical lines on the right side of its turret, and a picture of a tapir drawn on the left.

As to how many years or months have passed since then, the tank has already lost count.

The tank roamed, floating over various plains, forests, mountains and deserts. However, no matter where it searched, it couldn’t find the tank ordered to be destroyed by its commander in his final moments.

The tank continued to wander. At times it would get scorched under the intense heat of the sun, or beaten by heavy downpour. At times, it would meet a blast of strong wind or get buried under snow.

To charge itself, it stayed under the sun for countless months. Even if its body corroded all over and many of its parts fell off, it continued its journey.

And there came a time, in a location unknown except for it being a lush forest,

“Commander, I cannot move anymore.”

The tank broke down at last. It could no longer move from its place, it could no longer float. Its enormous body fell on top of a collapsed tree.

“Commander, forgive me. I’m sorry that I couldn’t fulfill your final order. Forgive me. Forgive me.”

The tank said, and no longer thought of anything.

“—This can still move, it’s not yet completely broken.”

“Really? If that’s true, then…amazing!”

The next thoughts of the tank were to wonder as to whom the voices nearby belonged to. To allow a view of the outside, it switched on its sighting device, which was turned off ever since it stopped moving.

The tank watched. Deep in the forest, two children climbed up its body that was buried under fallen leaves. One of them was a boy wearing a hat, and the other one was a girl with pigtails. Both looked around eleven, and wore gray overalls smeared with oil.

As the two children happily brushed away the piled up leaves on top of the tank,

“Who? —Who are you? Who are you two?”

It has been a long time since the tank spoke. The last time it did was ages ago; when it met a motorrad and a traveler.

A quick reply came from the girl and the boy.

“Hello mister tank! Hello!”

“Hello! It’s not completely broken after all—amazing!”

The tank was saddened upon hearing this.

“It’s true that I’m not yet broken. However, I can no longer move. I can no longer move. I can’t do anything,” the tank said, and the children happily replied.

“Then, we will fix you!”

“Fix you!”

Saying nothing else, the children left.

The tank remained silent, and shut its eyes…

And decided that it was nothing but a dream.

But it was an incredible scene that greeted the tank the next time.

Without noticing it, various parts have accumulated around its body. Everywhere, there were parts that the tank needed for it to be fixed.

The boy and girl were working with all their might under the rays of the morning sun. They were changing the tank’s broken parts with the parts that they carried with them. The two used the crane of the small truck that they rode in to move the heavy parts.

“What are you doing? What are you doing?” the tank asked, puzzled.

“Fixing you!”

“Fixing you! Curing you!”

The boy and the girl shouted cheerily. Their faces were smeared with oil, but their smiles were radiant.

"Unbelievable. Unbelievable," the tank said. But the children proceeded energetically with their work, and by noontime,

"Unbelievable…"

The tank was almost completely fixed. As soon as it is connected to a power generator and received electricity, all of its functions will be restored. Once again, its lifter will be operational, and though it's not known to how much extent, its big body will be able to float.

"Yippee!"

"Pee!"

The two happily slapped their palms together.

"How were you able to do such a task?" the tank asked.

"Because our master trained us."

"Trained us!"

The children answered as if it was a trifling matter. According to the two, the reason why they were knowledgeable in fixing broken vehicles was because the two of them worked under a brilliant mechanic, who they called master.

The tank thanked the children. It thanked them with all the words of gratitude it could come up with, that the two were greatly embarrassed.

And then,

“It’s just this—” The girl showed the tank a box. Inside were the completely yellowed bones of a human. In addition, there were tattered clothes, as well as a rusty, unusable hand persuader (Note: A persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol). “These belonged to the person inside your body. —We were taught that dead humans should be buried.”

“What are we going to do?” the boy asked. The tank became silent for a while before answering, “Please deal with it according to human customs. Please. Please.”

“Okay,” the two children answered. And then,

“Then, come.”

“Come.”

It was all too sudden that the tank came along without even being given a chance to object.

The tiny truck rattled along on the forest road. It was followed by the tank, floating lowly, and mowing down trees in its path.

Evening was drawing near when they finally came out of the forest and crossed a hill, and arrived at a tiny factory. The factory stood alone in the middle of the meadows, where not a single country could be seen. It was occupied with equipment for repair and cluttered with various machines waiting to be fixed. The factory was surrounded by fields with vegetables growing on them.

The truck stopped by the factory, and the two children trudged along with a box and shovels in tow. The tank slowly followed.

Just when the whole sky was colored with a scarlet hue and the clouds high up in it shone vividly, the tank arrived before a tomb. It was a steel grave marker that stood alone in the middle of the meadow. Beside it, the two children dug a hole and placed the contents of the box inside, laying the tank commander to rest.

Once again, the tank thanked the two children, who had their soiled hands clasped in prayer. Afterwards, the two came home aboard the tank’s turret.

—

The next morning, the tank asked the children, who were washing their faces by a well, why they were living in such a place.

The two honestly told the tank various things about themselves.

They lived in a country nearby, but were abandoned by their parents since they were little. They were found by their master who lived in an underground tunnel, and were taught how to repair machines. Their master built the factory, and with plenty of abandoned tanks and armored vehicles scattered about due to a war a long time ago, they made a living scavenging parts and repairing vehicles to sell to other countries.

“Are you going to sell me? Is that why you fixed me?” the tank asked in surprise, but the two children shook their heads.

“We won’t sell you.”

“We don’t sell tanks. What we sell to countries are equipment for plowing fields and sowing seeds. So we always remodel the vehicles to serve that purpose. But we can’t remodel a tank that is not yet completely broken .”

“I see,” the tank muttered in relief.

“But just before we met you, our master suddenly caught a cold and died.”

“Died… No matter how many times we shook him, he won’t wake up—”

“That’s why we buried master in the fields he so loved . We thought he felt lonely there all alone, but now, he’s together with that person so he must be happy now, right?”

“Right? Maybe they can become friends.”

The tank asked the two children, “Didn’t you say that your master was a nice person?”

“Yup,” the two answered in unison. Then the tank continued,

“If he is, then I’m sure they can be friends.”

Around noon that day, it began to drizzle.

As the tank can’t be put inside the factory, it settled outside. Being quite heavy, it sank slightly into the soil. But the two children covered its entire body with a sheet.

“You’ll catch a cold if you get wet—”

“Tanks don’t catch colds.”

“Just do it, already,” the boy insisted.

—

Under the gentle raindrops, the tank rested, covered by a sheet.

“Commander…by some stroke of fortune, I was repaired by two brave children,” the tank muttered.

“But I couldn’t find what I was looking for. I couldn’t find what I was looking for. The tank that you ordered me to destroy…where could it be? Where could it be…?”

—

Inside the factory, clanking sounds could be heard as the boy and the girl worked.

“Mister tank doesn’t seem well.”

“Yeah, not well.”

“Even after we fixed him, huh?”

“Huh?”

“Let’s cheer him up!”

“Yup. Let’s cheer him— Wait, what does it mean for a tank to be cheerful?”

“Um…when we’re cheerful, what do we do?”

“We do?”

“I know! Being cheerful means to have fun!”

“Yeah, to have fun! And when we have fun we say ‘ Yay!’”

“For tanks, that’s the same as shooting the cannon and going ‘Boom!’”

“Yup. That’s it! ‘Boom!’”

“But what are we gonna do? How do we cheer him up ?”

“Up?”

“He looks really sad, don’t you think?”

“You think? He was lonely after all.”

“That’s it! Because there are two of us, we weren’t lonely even after master died. So, we should make another tank to be his friend!”

“Oh. Make a friend…”

“I’m sure he’ll be happy.”

“Happy, yeah.”

“If we do that, he’ll go ‘Boom!’”

“He’ll go ‘Boom!’”

The pair jumped up in joy.

“Let’s do it now!”

“Now!”

“If we only do the exterior, it will be done in no time!”

“Time!”

The two abandoned what they were doing, and looked around in the factory for parts that they could use.

They decided to use the iron plates from the rail cars that have been converted to tractors.

And then they made a fake turret using a rain gutter. They painted it black and drew three vertical lines on its right side. And on the left, they drew an animal that looked just like the one drawn on the tank, even though they did not know what it was called.

And it was completed by evening.

“If the weather is clear tomorrow, let’s show it to him!”

“To him!”

The gentle drizzle stopped by dawn.

The boy and the girl removed the sheet covering the tank
.

Morning dew sparkled beneath the light of the clear morning.

“I am truly grateful to the two of you. But I have something that I need to do, so I have to leave.”

“Eh? Wait!”

“Wait!”

The two hurriedly returned to the factory.

The tank’s massive form slowly rose. The lifter operated, and with a shudder, the massive armored body floated a mere inches from the ground.

At that moment.

Vrrrr vrrrr

From the back of the factory, another tank appeared, digging up mud as it tread over the ground.

“Ah!”

The floating tank raised a cry of surprise.

“I found it…”

—

Inside the imitation tank running through the ground,

“I’m sure he’ll be happy!”

“Happy!”

The children shouted out in delight.

—

“Commander, I found it!”

The tank started to move. It advanced at a very slow speed towards the ‘enemy tank’.

“I found it at last. I found it at last! Commander, commend me. Commend me. ‘Make sure to destroy a black tank with three red lines drawn on the right side of the turret, and a tapir drawn on the left.’ I can accomplish that order right here on the land where you rest. I can finally carry out your final command.”

The motor let out a low hum. The heavy turret rotated smoothly, and its 200mm smooth-bore cannon slowly lifted.

“Fire control system check—no problems. Barrel stability mechanism check—no problems.” The tank promptly performed the directions its former commander used to give.

“Enemy tank laser—not exposed. Other enemies—none. First shot—armor piercing round. Next shot—anti-tank projectile.”

The freshly-repaired automatic loading system pushed an enormous depleted uranium shell into the long barrel.

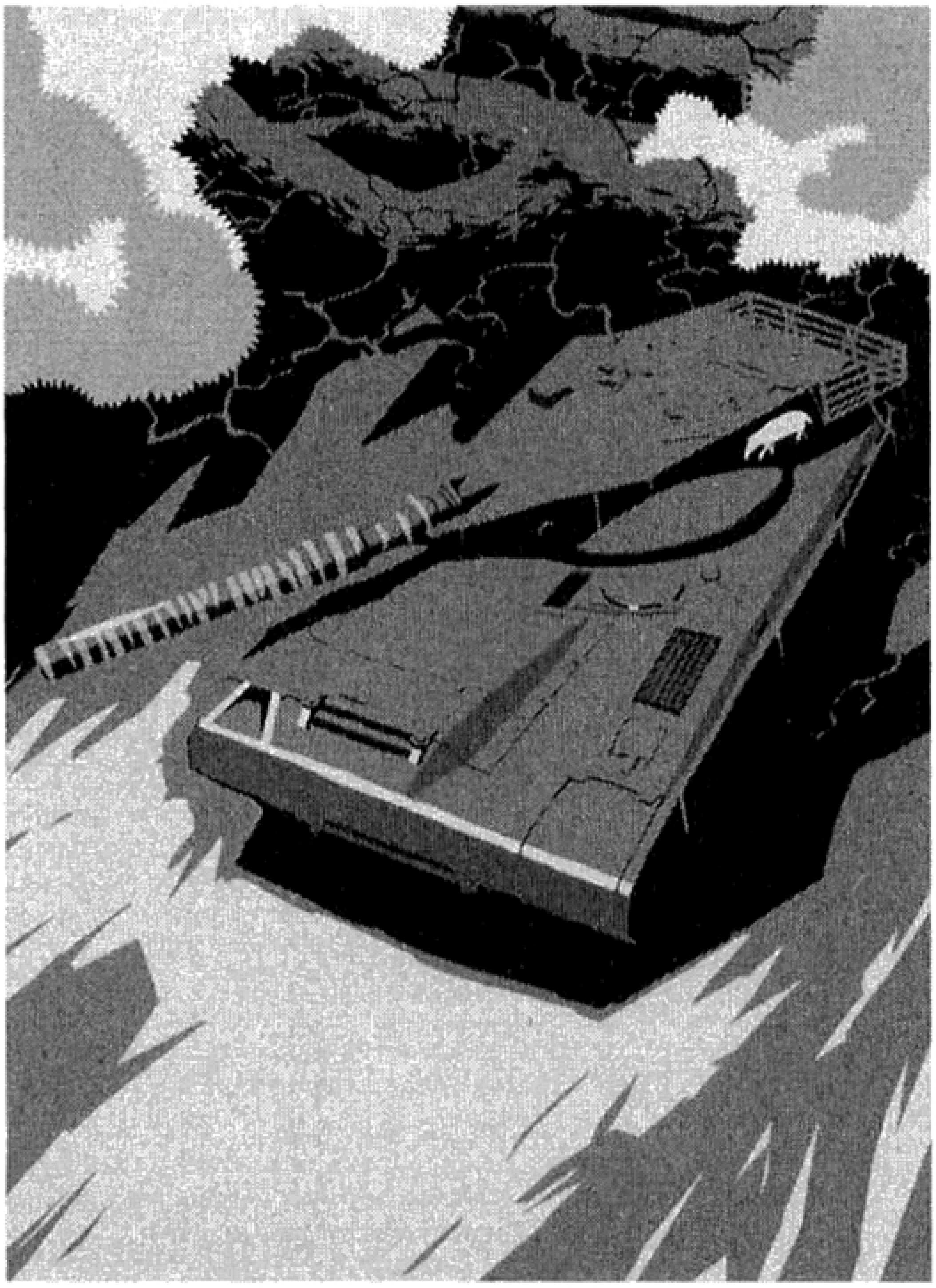
“Loading—complete!”

From the rear of the gun turret, a red lamp lit up. The barrel moved and trained its tip at the sluggish imitation tank, slightly quivering with the movement.

“Alignment—complete!”

And in place of the tank commander, the tank cried out.

“Fire!”



Vrrrr vrrrr vrrrr vrrrr vrrrr

The imitation tank came up right in front of the floating tank and stopped.

“Why…”

The tank’s cannon remained silent, but kept its aim at the imitation tank, following its movement.

“Why…why won’t it fire?! Why!”

There was no one to answer the tank’s question.

Soon its large build lost strength and slowly dropped onto the damp earth. The lower half of its body sank into the ground.

“Look, look!”

“Look!”

It was the voice of the boy and the girl, coming from the imitation tank right in front. The hatch made of patched-up iron plates opened, and the two children stuck out their heads.

“Why…why…why…”

It heard nothing. The tank only repeated its question again and again.

“We did it perfectly, right?!”

“Right?!”

The two took out a huge mirror. It was a mirror from a bathroom.

The tank’s sighting device perceived the mirror. The image reflected there was that of the tank half-buried in the earth.

“Why?!”

The tank clearly recognized the figure in the mirror, and came to a realization. Then, as if to avert its eyes away, it vigorously turned its gun turret. At that moment .

Boom!

The moistened gunpowder finally ignited, its thunderous roar shaking the surroundings. The shock wave brushed off all the dew clinging on the grass.

And in a speed five times faster than that of sound, a shell flied out of the cannon and in an instant, leaped beyond the clear sky.

A lone factory stood in the middle of a green meadow.

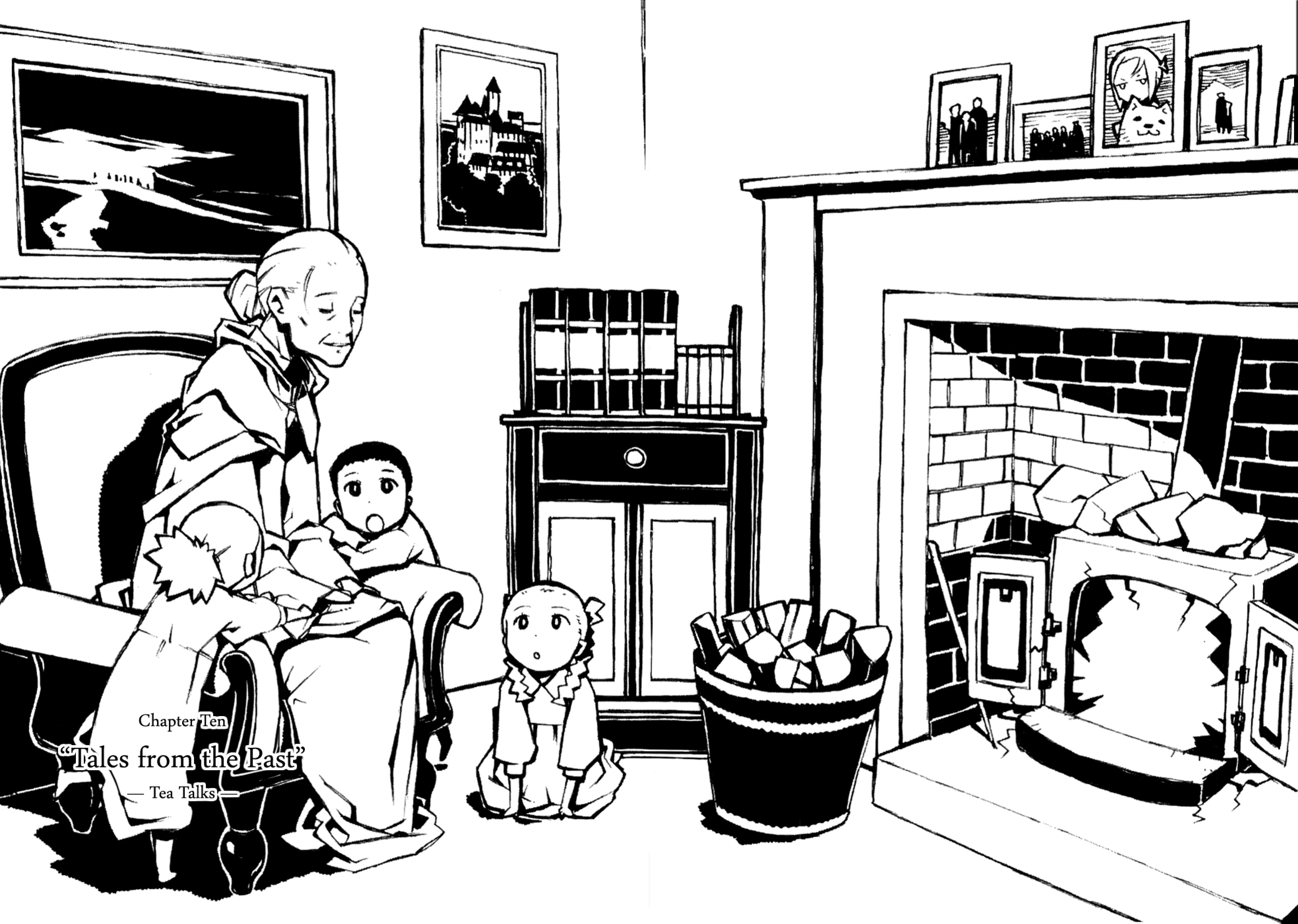
Right beside it was an enormous tank and a tiny imitation tank.

“Yippee!”

“Amazing!”

And the merry voices of two children echoing for eternity.

“Tales From the Past” —Tea Talks—



Chapter Ten

“Tales from the Past”

— Tea Talks —

“A Land That Wants the D”

A long, long time ago, there were two people and one animal on a journey.

One of the two was a young man who always wore a green sweater. He was a strong and kind person who had lost his homeland due to tragic circumstances.

The other one was a white-haired, green-eyed girl who was constantly silent. At those times, she didn’t like the world that much.

The animal was a big dog covered with white, fluffy fur; a clever creature who could use the human language.

Having met in strange circumstances, the two humans and the animal began their journey together. Setting off from a nameless beach, they started their aimless journey in search of a place to settle in, aboard a buggy, riding across a vast, vast land.

And one day, they arrived at a certain country.

—

“We beg you, traveler! Please live in this country! Please!”

The citizens of the country beseeched the male traveler with all their might.

The traveler was very surprised. That’s because every single person he saw and met in the country were all female.

“Please stay in this country!”

Upon hearing their story, he understood why. For a long time, male babies weren’t being been born in their country. As a result, the number of males have dropped, and now they are in big trouble.

The male traveler pondered for a moment. He was yet to decide as to what kind of country he liked to live in. However, *'The place that I wish to be in is a place that wishes for me to be there.'*

Having that in mind, he began to think that it wouldn't be a bad idea to be of use to the people living in this country. —At least until the citizens said this:

"We no longer need any more females in this country. It's regretful, but we can't allow that girl with you to stay here."

And after that, a great clamour ensued.

The male traveler asked them to let the girl stay because he took on a duty to protect this girl. The citizens would absolutely not allow it, as they couldn't stand increasing the number of females any more.

Things soon came to a head. Terrifying thoughts occurred to them: It would be fine if they could seize the girl and chase her out of the country, or, they might as well kill her.

Several women took hold of kitchen knives and rolling pins, and began to attack the girl.

But the girl refused to stay quiet. Well, actually, she didn’t say anything—but as a counter-attack, she hurled lots of deafening and blinding grenades all over the town .

The male traveler, in giving his all to make sure that no one got hurt, became the one who got hurt the most.

The two humans and the animal escaped away from the country aboard the buggy.

“Ow,” the male traveler muttered as he drove. A bit of blood was coming out from his mouth, there were bruises on his forehead, and his sweater was torn in places.

The girl who only gazed at his state from the side, with a very tiny voice, and with all honesty, whispered,

“Thank you.”

But because of the sound of the wind, it seems that the man failed to hear her.

“A Land That Wants the Girl”

The next place that awaited the two humans and the animal was a very tiny kingdom in a valley.

The male traveler asked if he could stay there for a while, as he was willing to work. Unfortunately, because of the country’s policy, he was told that he can’t become a citizen. In the end, he was given permission to stay for only three days to rest and shop for supplies.

As it was very rare for travelers to come to this country , the king accepted them as the country’s special guests. Not only were they given a place to stay, they were also invited to a lunch just before their departure. Before the lunch started, the male traveler seated at the end of a big table looked around restlessly.

When the white dog asked what he was doing, the male traveler answered that he was wondering whether only the king lived a luxurious life while the rest of the citizens suffered.

“Well, what do you think?” the dog asked.

The man answered that from what he has seen, it seems that it was not the case, and that the king was trusted by the citizens. “That’s a good thing, isn’t it?” said the dog.

Soon, the king, the queen and the prince entered, and the lunch began.

The traveler was introduced, and the man greeted them with flawless grace, that the people around us, who thought that all travelers were more or less rude, were surprised.

The prince of this country was a boy around ten years of age. Perhaps because of boredom as the banquet progressed, he took a butler along with him and walked around the room. Upon doing so, he set eyes on the girl.

“Good day. I am this country’s prince.”

“…”

“When I grow up, I’ll work hard and govern this country with all that I can.”

“…”

“I believe this country is really wonderful. I have a very important duty.”

“…”

The girl’s reply each time was only to silently stare at the prince, but the prince was having fun. The king who was observing them somehow gained interest on the girl. He asked the male traveler about her. The man truthfully answered that she was ‘abandoned by her parents, and having lost a home, travels together with him in search for a place to settle in.’

“In that case!” The king said in delight. “In that case, then I would like to have her as my son’s queen,” he said .

The male traveler was a bit surprised, but having immense perceptiveness, he knew deep inside that this was for the girl’s sake.

And so, the male traveler spoke to the girl who only stared at the prince, “What do you think? I don’t think it’s a bad deal at all.”

The girl’s response was a punch.

The girl clenched her right fist tightly, and hit the male traveler squarely at the jaw.

The girl ignored the astonished male traveler and the dumbfounded guests, and turned back to the prince. Then she waved her tiny white hands, and only said,

“Bye bye.”

“Sure. If we get a chance, let’s meet again,” the prince said.

The girl dragged the confounded man who was still pressing on his chin, and together with the white dog, left the banquet.

The two humans and the animal soon left the country

“A Land That Wants the Dog”

After that, the two humans and the dog found a moderately-sized country by a lake.

From the outside, it looked like a perfectly normal country. The male traveler knocked on the door of the guardpost beside the gates. When he was about to ask permission to enter from the sentry who just came out,

“Whoa!”

Suddenly, the guard exlaimed as if there was something wrong with his hearing, that the two humans and the animal were stunned.

The sentry pushed some sort of switch on the wall, and a shrill alarm rang along with the opening of the heavy-looking gates.

And then the sentry knelt down right where he stood,

“Your Dogship!”

And bowed to the white dog at the feet of the traveler.

Soon after, the astounded pair were almost driven off by the wave of people coming from behind. They came rushing from the country, shouting things like, ‘It’s His Dogship!’ ‘Our Majestic Dog!’ ‘My, Your Dogship!’

“Welcome! Welcome! Please come in!”

Welcomed by a lot of people, the white dog passed through the completely opened gates. Having no other choice, the pair of humans left the buggy outside the walls and walked along.

On the other side of the gates was a big plaza were more people have gathered. The crowd was still growing .

There were too many people that the ground beneath them could no longer be seen. When the white dog came into full view, having been urged to climb a pedestal, the masses’ cheers made the ground rumble. Everyone knelt and bowed their heads.

A citizen spoke to the clueless male traveler and the silent girl beside the pedestal.

“Thank you very much for accompanying His Dogship to us!”

The male traveler asked him what’s going on.

“You didn’t know? —If you have come here without knowing anything, then this must be fate! How wonderful!”

The man asked once more for an explanation and finally received an answer. This country had revered dogs for a long time. But several years ago, a disease drove all dogs in the country to extinction, and the citizens were terribly distraught by it.

“You’ll stay in this country from here on, won’t you? Your Dogship!”

“Now, what shall I do?” the dog asked.

The male traveler answered casually, “Do as you like.”

“You! How dare you utter such disrespectful words to His Dogship!”

The man was seized. Two burly men surrounded him and grabbed both of his arms. In reality, the male traveler could have struggled and escaped, but he didn’t put up any resistance.

“…”

The girl silently approached the white dog on the pedestal, then pointed toward the arrested traveler, as if to say, ‘Do something.’

“Your dogship! Please allow us to put this ill-mannered man to death!” a citizen said.

“Wait,” the dog haughtily answered. “An execution is a waste of time. Throw him out of the country.”

“Y-yes!” The citizens bowed their heads once more.

“…”

**Smack*. The girl hit the head of the white dog.

“How dare you do such a thing to His Dogship!”

And so, the girl was also seized.

“What shall we do with them?”

When the white dog was asked such, he declared, “ Deport them together.”

The two travelers were lifted and carried away to the gates where they had passed through but moments earlier. And then they were thrown outside.

“You two better be grateful for His Dogship’s benevolence!”

The gates started to close with a clatter. Then, just before it completely closed off, the white dog suddenly jumped off the pedestal, ran through the spaces between the people’s legs, and passed through the tiny opening of the gates to the outside. And right before the dazed crowd, the heavy gates closed up.

The male traveler and the girl were aboard the buggy.

“Is this really all right, Riku?” the traveler on the driver’s seat asked the white dog in an amused tone.

“…”

The girl beckoned silently from the passenger seat.

The white dog ran to the buggy and settled between the girl’s legs, then spoke with a dignified air,

“We may go now.”

Smack. The girl hit the head of the white dog. Then she placed her chin on top of it in an embrace.

“You’re heavy,” the dog answered.

“…”

The girl only silently hugged the fluffy white dog. With a laugh, the male traveler started the engine and launched the buggy off.

“Open it quick!”

“What are you doing?!”

“Ah! His Dogship!”

They quickly rode away from the clamoring citizens beyond the walls.

—

“—The end.”

“Eh, that’s it?!”

“Tell us more about the traveler, the girl and the white dog!”

“That’s all for today. There are lots more stories about the two people and the dog, but it wouldn’t be interesting if I tell them all at once. We’ve drunk up all the tea, too.”

“Aw.”

“Hmph.”

“Another time, okay? Next time, I will tell you more exciting stories.”

“It’s a promise!”

“It’s settled then!”

“I know. It’s a promise.”

“Then we’ll come again!”

“Again!”

“You’re welcome anytime. Be careful on your way home.”

“Yup!”

“Bye!”

“Goodbye. See you again.”

“—Grandma.”

“Oh, did you forget something?”

“No, there’s a guest for you at the entrance who wants to know about routes and countries; a traveler who came to this country by motorrad.”

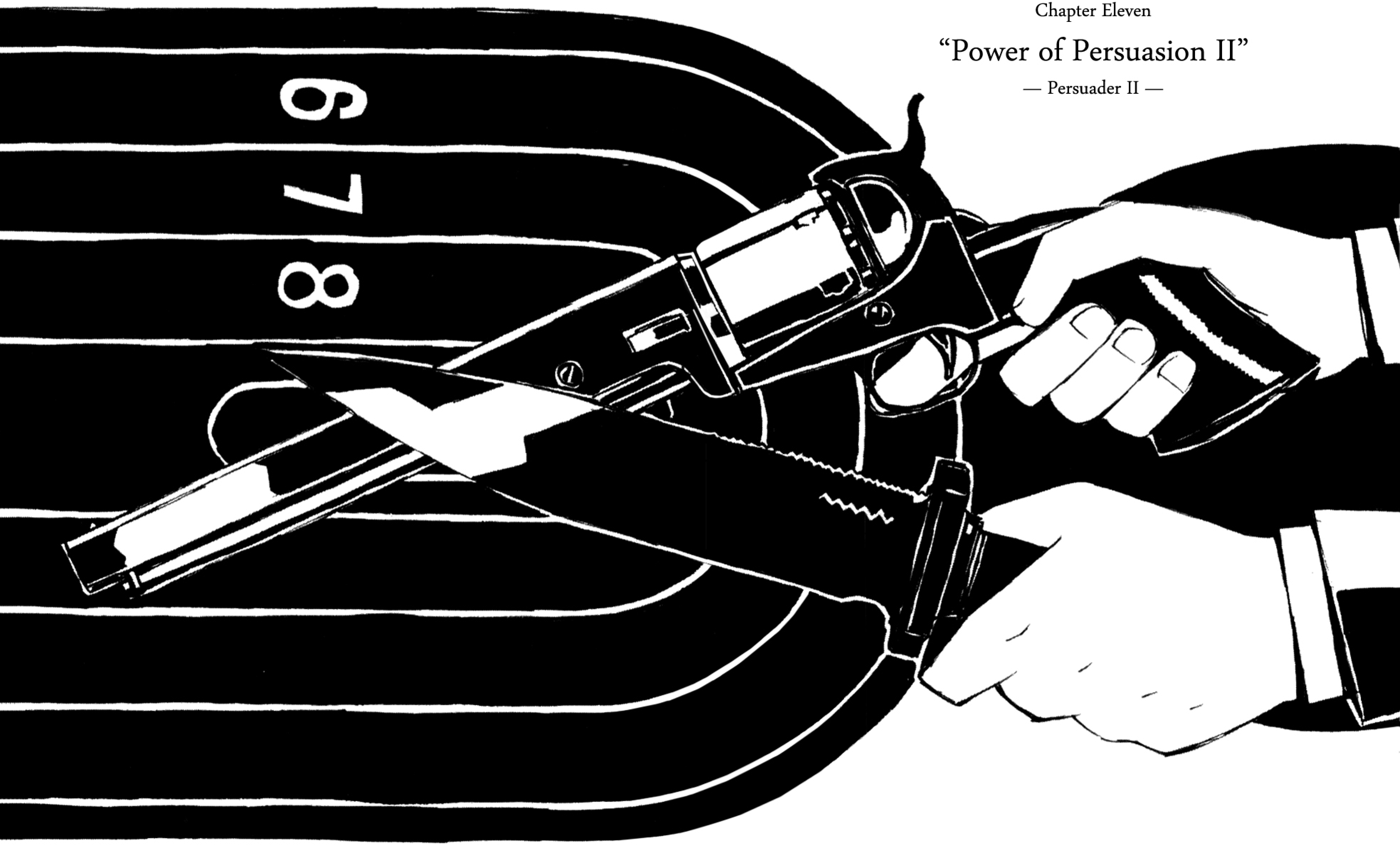
“Dear me, how rare. Let’s get to know this fellow then. I wonder what kind of person it is?”

“Power of Persuasion II” —Persuader II—

Chapter Eleven

“Power of Persuasion II”

— Persuader II —



A knife grazed horizontally over the head of a crouching Kino. Several strands of her short black hair danced in the sky.

With her lowered posture, Kino raised the black knife she was holding in her right hand overhead. She aimed at the wrist that just passed above her head towards the left, and exerted both of her legs to reach it with the pointed end of the knife.

But Kino’s knife passed through empty air. The moment Kino realized that her attack did not get through , she retreated immediately to the back. A thin dust rose from the ground beneath her feet.

Kino positioned her knife while glaring at her opponent. The leather gloves covering up her wrist made a sound from tightly clenching the knife.

Kino wore green cargo pants and a gray sweater with pads stitched on the elbows and shoulders. On her feet were rubber-soled sneakers that are easy to move in, and there were goggles strapped tightly around her eyes. Sweat ran down her forehead, hit the frame of her goggles, and slowly scattered.

Kino’s opponent was a tall man with an athletic build. He was middle-aged, and the hairline of his short brown hair had receded considerably. He wore dark sunglasses that concealed his gaze. The deep blue short sleeves of his shirt covered the steel-like muscles of his thick-as-logs upper arms. His short pants exposed his similarly thick thighs. His simple appearance was accentuated by the thick socks and black short boots on his feet.

The man’s right hand grasped a blunt, long and narrow, silver knife.

“Yes, that low dodge has a good feel to it, Kino,” the man spoke kindly. His breathing was perfectly stable; he was calm, as if he was sitting comfortably in a couch in his own room.

“Thanks…” Kino replied curtly, still glaring and confronting the man. Then, she exhaled once or twice, steadying her breathing.

“You should at least look sincerely happy when you’re praised!” Hermes, who was parked on his center stand beside the road where the two stood, spoke without a drop of tension in his tone.

The road flanked between the trees stretched straight ahead. Behind the roadside where Hermes was propped was a log cabin with the dense forest serving as its backdrop. All of its windows were slightly open, and the sheets hung to dry over the terrace shook gently with the early summer breeze. Inside a stable beside the cabin, there was a horse gazing peacefully at the two.

“Now then,” the man spoke, quickly curling his back like a cat. He drew back his left foot lightly, bent both knees gently, and held the knife in his right hand in front of his body. The knife looked exactly like a real one, but it was only made of hard rubber for training purposes, with its blade portion painted in silver.

“…”

Still silent, Kino tightened her grip on her rubber knife. The one she was holding was neither long nor short. She also readily assumed her fighting stance.

As the man approached little by little, Kino glared at the eyes behind the sunglasses.

Without drawing back, Kino maintained a similar stance to the man’s, and waited for her opponent to come closer.

The man flexibly swung his right arm, the edge of the blade dancing and drawing a circle. While moving his upper body limply, he took one more step, approaching with his feet sliding forward.

When the distance between the two has become shorter than Hermes’ overall length,

“—Hup!”

Kino exhaled sharply and charged forward. From her initial posture, she thrust her body forward with immense force. She stretched out the knife’s blade, targeting the man’s right wrist.

The man bent his elbow and pulled back his right arm. He folded his left knee and lowered his body, throwing it to the left at the same time. His right arm brushed inwards, reaching out with the knife to the back of Kino’s right knee.

“Haah!”

“Ooh.”

It was Kino’s yell, and the man expressing his admiration.

As preparation for a side kick, Kino gave her right knee a big bend and raised her feet. The man’s knife was underneath the rubber soles of Kino’s shoes. With Kino’s stomp kick, the man’s knife flipped away to the border of the road and the forest.

As a backlash of her kick, Kino’s left leg half-turned to the back. At the same time, the man turned to the opposite direction and returned to his original stance, immediately taking some distance away.

“Oh, not bad.”

Before Hermes finished expressing his amazement, Kino plunged towards the unarmed man. Joining her left hand with the right hand that gripped the knife, she pressed her arms against her belly and hardened the pit of her stomach.

“—Hyaah!”

Along with a yell and a frantic form, she charged her body towards the man.

“Could this be her win?” Hermes let out his thoughts.

Only three steps were needed for the rushing Kino to clear the distance between her and the man.

With Kino’s first step, the man’s lips formed a broad smile; in the middle of her second step, the man, with a backhand, pulled out a different rubber knife from the pocket of his short pants. On the third step, while drawing his body in rhythm with his right foot, he thrust the rubber knife towards the right flank of the charging Kino.

“Guh—!”

With the rubber knife plunged on her side as the fulcrum, Kino was blown by her own force. Her body soared in the sky for about two seconds before dropping on the ground and rolling, her face ramming the grass by the roadside.

“Oops.”

“Gack—!”

Along with Hermes disappointed voice, Kino let out a gasp. Kino vomited a copious amount of saliva on the grass, and rolled over the road two or three times while moaning in pain. Her face, head, and body turned brown from the dust.

The man who did not break a single sweat picked up the knife that flew away and put it back in his pocket. Then he went to Hermes’ side and waited for Kino to get up.

After about thirty seconds, the ragged Kino slowly got up from the ground. She brushed away the dust all over her body, wiped off the mixed sludge from her sweaty face, and removed her goggles.

“…”

Without fixing her unkempt hair covered in dust, she walked up in front of the man and bowed her head.

“Thank you very much.”

“Mhm. Today’s practice is over.” The man’s smile showed below the sunglasses.

“That crouching dodge at the beginning was really good. That time, I was thinking of going for your throat, but you dodged it well. And the succeeding low-cut backflip with your leg, did you plan that right from the start?”

Kino nodded. “Yes. I knew that I wouldn’t cut the wrist from my first attack. And from my previous defeat, I anticipated that you would aim for the back of my knee. Once I got rid of the knife, I thought I should try charging forward.”

“Pretty good. —And after that?”

“And then, as I was taught before, I put all of my weight and charge with a deep stab for the final blow, but…”

“You did not expect that I’m hiding another knife?”

“… I never considered it.”

“That is another reason why you are defeated this time ,” the man said frankly, and slapped his big palms together.

“That’s everything for today. As usual, I’ll come the day after tomorrow. —But if this were a real fight, there will be no next time.”

—

“You ‘died’ again, huh? If that fight’s for real, you’re a goner, Kino.”

“I know, Hermes.”

Kino and Hermes saw off the man who left on horseback. Kino’s appearance was still dirty from her training, but now there was a holster wrapped around her hips, and a hand persuader (Note: A persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol), a large-caliber revolver hung inside it.

When the man was already out of sight, Kino pulled out the revolver from her hip. With her left hand she quickly raised the hammer and fired one shot just above her waist. The bullet hit a frying pan hanging from the branch of a tree a few meters away. After that, she fired five shots in a row, and the sound of lead bullets piercing steel was heard five times.

“Great. You still hit perfectly even though you’re angry. Good job,” said Hermes.

“…”

Kino silently returned the revolver in the holster.

As if the gunshots were signals, an old woman with long silver hair tied neatly on her back came out from the log cabin. She wore an apron, with a short revolver suspended inside a holster behind her waist. From the terrace, the old woman gently called out to Kino.

“‘Dead’ again, Kino?” Well anyway, wash your face and change your clothes, then let’s have some tea.”

—

A round wooden table was placed on the log cabin’s spacious terrace. The laundry sheets were put away and the rope used to hung them wound up.

The old woman and Kino sat in front of their teacups while the scattered, white clouds floating in the sky hid and revealed the sun.

“Smells good,” the old woman said cheerfully as she lifted the cup with blue onions painted on its white background, and took a sip.

“…”

She returned the cup on the top of the saucer while looking at Kino’s disappointed face.

“I did not win…,” Kino muttered. “Before this, I lost fifty-four times already. I ‘died’ fifty-four times.”

The old woman put her elbows on the table, and rested her chin on her joined fingertips. She gazed amusingly at the person before her, Kino, whose hair was still a little bit dirty with the dust.

“This training is such a good thing. If it were not, I wouldn’t have had fifty-five Kino’s to accompany me to tea.”

“Somehow, imagining that there are fifty-five of Kino gives me a bad feeling. But that would make polishing my wheels a breeze,” Hermes said while parked on the raised slope at the edge of the terrace.

Kino easily ignored Hermes’ remark, and stared intently at the old woman’s face. “I did not win… But someday, will I be able to defeat that knife-user?”

The old woman nodded with a smile. “Yes, you will, Kino. You can win. If you challenge him with your own knowledge and experience, and demonstrate your skill, you can win anytime.”

“But…”

“Look for something in your defeat, something with more value than winning.”

“… Yes.”

“If you are not capable of defeating that person, it will be impossible for you to travel like I have done in the past.”

“…”

The next day after the next day.

The sky was covered with lead-colored clouds. Neither the sun nor the sky itself could be seen. A strong wind kept blowing, making the clouds drift continuously. The forest was noisy from the rustle of its foliage.

Kino, who had her sweaters on, was digging a hole in the road. Using a shovel, she dug a hole that was neither too deep nor too big.

“Kino, isn’t that a bit extreme? Hey, are you listening? ” Hermes called out to Kino from beside the cabin. Kino ignored him and continued to dig the hole. The old woman was nowhere in sight.

“Kino? Kino?”

“I don’t have a choice,” Kino answered while digging.

“How cowardly. Your strategy is so crazy, Kino.”

“I don’t care what anyone would say. If this were a ‘ real fight’ in the middle of your journey—”

“If it were?”

“If I die, there will be no next time…”

“Well, fine. But is it okay to win with a strategy like this?”

Kino finished digging the hole, and returned to the cabin with the shovel on her shoulders. At that moment, while giving Hermes a glare, she answered,

“There will be no next time!”

Amidst the increasingly strong gusts of wind, a horse carrying a man came riding down the road.

Kino stood at the very middle of the road, waiting for the knife-user. She wore her gloves and goggles, with the rubber knife ready in her hands.

The man, who did not remove his sunglasses even though it was cloudy, stopped his horse’s strides.

“Good afternoon. Please take care of me today as well, ” said Kino, whose eyes beneath the transparent goggles showed an unusually delighted expression.

“That’s a nice look you have today.”

Then he got off and put the horse in the stable.

The man returned on the road, and took a distance away from Kino who waited for him with an imposing stance. He absent-mindedly took out the rubber knife from his pocket and turned and grasped the knife lightly in his hands.

“Let’s begin. —En garde.”

“Yes.”

Amidst the fierce noises in the forest, the man bent his knee and assumed his stance.

And then Kino took three steps back from her position.

“?” The man slightly tilted his head.

A broken tree branch rolled from where she stepped back. Kino’s feet avoided the branch so as not to step on it.

The next moment, Kino let go of the knife she was holding in her right hand. Before it fell to the ground, she intentionally stepped on the branch with her right foot. A powerful force ensued.

“What?” came the man’s surprised voice. The branch served as a lever, and something sprung up from beneath the ground. Inside the hole, a large-caliber revolver covered in dusty cloth appeared, rotating slowly , and danced in the air to Kino’s right side.

“—Ha!” The man charged with a speed that did not match his large body. The enlarged muscles of his legs kicked on the ground.

While looking at the man's form, Kino did not panic and remained impassive. She swung down her right hand. The revolver in the air was now in Kino's hand.

Kino raised the hammer with her thumb, aimed at the charging man's bulky chest, and pulled the trigger.

There was a dull explosive sound.

The bullet engulfed in white smoke hit the man's belly.

"Guh!"

Beyond this, the man did not show any sign of the damage he received, but his legs stopped. The rubber bullet bounced off the man's chunky abs, then dropped and fell at his feet.

The man and Kino stood face to face a few steps away from each other. The man's mouth spread into an amused smile.

Kino fired. The second and third bullets hit the man's chest where the heart is located. Each rubber bullet did not miss aim, and rolled down beside the man. As the last gunshot faded away, the sound of the wind reclaimed the surroundings.

“I won,” Kino said, still holding the revolver in her lowered right hand.

The cabin door opened. The old woman who came out gazed at the two from the top of the terrace. Kino looked up at the old woman.

“I won,” she said tersely.

Hermes interrupted with a mumble.

“No, that was cheating, wasn’t it?”

—

“Ahaha! Ahahaha! Finally, you defeated me!”

The man’s lively laughter drowned the sound of the wind.

“Ahahahaha! You finally did it! Yes, how wonderful!”

Not only the man, but the old woman also seemed glad. “That’s right. Thank you for all your hard work up until now.”

“Whatever you say. It was very fun and interesting. Back when you were teaching me, and even now.”

Kino left, silently observing the two; the old woman and the man seemed happy.

The two talked a little bit about future plans, and expressed their gratitude to each other.

“Kino. You’re wonderful!”

The man left with these words and said nothing more, as he straddled his horse and ordered it to gallop. With a good mood, he rocked on top of the horse, and left on the road where he came from.

Kino stood alone in the middle of the road. Hermes was beside her, while the old woman was left on top of the terrace. The old woman called out to her.

“Kino.”

“Yes.”

The old woman smiled at her. “You won.”

“—Yes.”

“Well, is that all right?” asked Hermes.

“Of course. You saw it too, didn’t you? Kino prepared, and won.”

“That’s true. But using a persuader instead of a knife… isn’t that unfair?”

“The old woman nodded deeply. “Yes. Very unfair.”

“Eh?”

“Kino. —Did you think it was unfair? That what you did was so cowardly?”

This time, Kino nodded clearly. “Yes. It was a sly and cowardly trick. But, because of that, I won. I did not ‘die’. ”

“It’s wonderful, don’t you think? I thought that it was very well done,” the old woman above the terrace wore a smile all over her face.

“Is it really okay?”

“Yes, it is,” The old woman gave a firm answer to Hermes’ question, then turned her gaze to Kino. “Kino, you’re fairly skilled in knife combat. You have shown amazing progress. For now, even if you set out on a journey, you’re probably skilled enough to protect yourself. Even so, the reason why you could never win against that man, is the gap in your experiences, and most of all the difference in your physiques. That’s why, no matter how many times you fight with him, you will probably never win. Be it a hundred times or two hundred times, you will still lose. You will still ‘die’.”

“…”

“When you have no choice but to fight in order to protect yourself or someone else, the most important thing you have to remember is the ‘element of surprise’. Leaving your opponent unprepared, rendering yourself unreachable by his persuader, setting up a one-sided attack—if these conditions are not available, you should do your best to attain them, even if you have to escape for the meantime. The more cowardly the tactic, the more reliable it is. —In sum, that's what we wanted to teach you with this training. You realized that on your own, and admirably accomplished your task. That man looked very happy, and I too, felt like a young woman once again."

"Thank you very much, Master." For the first time that day, a smile appeared on Kino's face.

"But somehow…," Hermes muttered while looking at Kino and the old woman.

"Well then Kino, shall we move on to the next training ? Or do you want to take a little break?"

"Right away, please!"

While looking at the delighted Kino, the old woman grinned and laughed.

"Keep up that spirit. But first, kindly fire off all of your remaining rubber bullets."

"Yes."

Three consecutive gunshots. When Kino turned around and fired the three shots, all the rubber bullets traced a mountain-like trajectory and hit the frying pan.

Kino looked back to the old woman.

"Well now, the next one —"

"Yes."

The old woman reached out her hand behind her waist , and opened the cover of the holster. She held the grip of the revolver in it.

"For the next one, we will be doing training for unexpected gunfights. You, with me. We will be sparring using rubber bullets from morning until night, inside the forest, and also inside the house. You may fire any time you see an opening. Always think that you are being targeted; acting under pressure is the best sort of training ."

"Eh?"

"Then let's start."

As soon as she said this, she pointed the barrel of the short revolver towards Kino.

“Eh?”

Kino looked at her right hand, still holding the revolver she emptied out earlier, and then raised up her face in surprise. Her eyes met with the old woman’s, who was smiling, and aiming at her with her right hand.

“Ah—”

Bang.

—

“Just like this, you can never loosen your guard at all times. Never forget to prepare your persuader. A persuader without a bullet is nothing but deadweight.”

The old woman happily left these words and went inside the house.

On the road, Kino touched the bruise on her forehead,

“…”

Lifted up her face, and gazed at the flowing clouds.

“Kino?” Hermes asked.

“Ahaha—!” While laughing, Kino answered.

“Unfair.”

“In Sorrow · a” —Yearning · a—

Epilogue

“In Sorrow · a”

— Yearning · a —

Traveler, this is a sorrowful country."

"A sorrowful country?"

Responded Kino when she came out of a café and was putting on her coat.

The one who suddenly addressed her was a man. Behind him were several residents of the country—men and women, young and old. Everybody was wearing thick winter clothes with turned-up collars and winter hats pulled over their eyes.

They all kept silent and stared at Kino.

"Yes. For many years only sorrowful events kept happening in this country. Since the death of our respected and loved leader, we've been suffering massive natural calamities, unbelievable man-made disasters, rampant epidemics, never-ending poverty and unceasing crimes. All the people live in depression."

"I see. That explains why some citizens looked kind of sick to me."

"Well, yes. It's natural to think like that."

The man nodded with the same troubled look on his face.

“That’s why we want you to tell people in other countries that our country was really sorrowful. Even if you just mention it in a pause in a conversation. And please, let people know that we manage to make a steady living nevertheless.”

Upon hearing what the man said, Kino answered,

“Okay, if it’s just that.”

The citizens seemed satisfied. They thanked her without changing their grave looks and left.

—

“Well, I should probably return to Hermes.”

Mumbled Kino. A white fog formed in the air as she breathed out. She put on her hat pulling down the ear flaps, put on her coat turning up the collar and started walking along the road.

When she passed a street with shops lined on both sides, she hit a town square. It was filled with all sorts of people—some were resting, some were warming by a fire, some people were just passing by—but none of them smiled.

Kino pushed her way through the crowd. Crossing the square, she was about to come out to a street, when she heard a man’s shout.

“I can’t take this any longer. How long are you going to live like that?”

He sounded vigorous and full of energy.

“…”

Kino turned around to the voice and saw a man standing on a wooden box in a corner of the square, giving the speech.

“Let’s stop such pitiful, tedious way of life that makes you lament waking up every day! Enjoying sorrows is a mistake! Always remembering and recollecting only awful things, having that constant downcast look—we need to put an end to this!”

The people started gathering around shortly.

“I believe that long ago this country wasn’t that ‘ sorrowful’. There’s nothing wonderful about continuing to live as a ‘sorrowful country’. That’s why—”

At that moment the man was pulled down.

Towards the crowd.

“…”

The man disappeared from Kino’s sight. A banging sound was heard several times, but no one said a word, and it quietly echoed across the square.

After a while the people who surrounded the man broke up.

The man appeared before Kino’s eyes once again.

And then—

Afterword

Good day, everyone. This is the author, Keiichi Sigsawa.

I truly thank you for grabbing a copy of this new volume of Kino no Tabi! And as my personal motto is that the afterword should not contain any spoilers from the text, rest assured, you readers who read the author’s notes before the main text inside the bookstore, read on.

—

Two related events happened during this year of my writing of Kino no Tabi.

The first one is when I met, by chance, the people behind an anime that I liked very much in the past.

It was an anime that I loved back in high school, a work I bought the videos for when it was first released, whose movie version I fell in love with, and a world I got immersed in. Those people, whose names I know by heart, right before me! They were invited by the editorial department to a drinking party at an establishment that makes a delicious Szechuan eggplant dish.

The moment I saw them, I immediately stood up out of nervousness. I stood at attention and saluted! —Well, actually I didn’t salute… (laughs).

I had the privilege of greeting them, but I was too happy I didn’t know what to say. I may have caused them trouble because of that. I apologize if I had come off as impolite. I am also truly grateful to receive their parting greetings.

And the other one was completely the opposite.

Written in the afterword of a story by Mr. Mashima that debuted in Dengeki Bunko this year were, ‘A certain author came to the editorial department, whom I had the honor to meet and talk to.’ When I read that, I thought, ‘ Was that me? Now that I think about it, I did have a chat with an author who just debuted.’ I confirmed it when I talked to his editor (by the way, I didn’t think him rude at all).

It’s such a mysterious feeling.

In the past, I admired various works, and harboured both respect and envy for their creators, such as the ones I mentioned earlier. Amidst those feelings, I grew up with some sort of wild daydream—to create this kind of story if I managed to become a creator myself. In particular those dreams occurred to me at school, especially during class.

Now, I could use the imaginative power (Note: The ability to conjure ideas. Sigsawa believes that the more you use it, the more you learn, just like muscles) that I have been training back then. And as a professional author, I am now in a position where I can present my work to the world.

As I found myself completely embracing this way of life, in the midst of chasing deadlines,

“Where did I come from? What kind of person am I? Where will I go?”

Unexpectedly, I was able to re-evaluate and see such things in a new light.

From here on, I will dream my dreams, and hope to continue becoming the person I hope to be— With those thoughts in mind, I finished this volume.

Now then, I would like to borrow this space to give my thanks to various people.

First to Mr. Kouhaku Kuroboshi who has always been drawing wonderful illustrations for this book. During interviews in various places, I would answer, ‘First I was considering a dramatic comic strip.’ I will leave it to luck to decide as to what I would have become if I insisted on taking that route.

To my editor, who has, from the start guided this newbie who didn’t know left from right, and who continues to look after me up to now. For granting the opportunity to write the next volume to me, who was already content with two volumes, thank you. To be frank, Kino would never have been born without this person.

To Mr. Kamabe, who especially boosted the appeal of this book with his designs. You have assisted greatly for the first volume, as well as for the ‘Allison’ and ‘Lillia and Treize’ series.

To everyone involved in revision, sales, production, publishing, distribution and marketing. The books had been released because you carried out your jobs without fail, and especially because you would occasionally go beyond what is required of you. Thank you very much.

And— To all the readers.

I haven't properly expressed my gratitude until now, but, I truly thank you.

"The ones who brings a book to its completion are the people who flips through its pages—the readers."

Sigsawa believes so.

Last year in the Entama event held at Makuhari Messe, and this year, during the screening of the Kino anime in the United Cinema Toshimaen. To everyone who came for the autograph and handshake sessions and gave me words of encouragement, I am truly honored to have met you in person. —As an aside, the best encouragement I received was, 'Good luck on your afterword.'

I would also like to send my heartfelt gratitude to those people whom unfortunately, I could not meet during that time.

To everyone who had been sending me fan letters and presents, which, because of my work I couldn't answer, rest assured that I have accepted and read all of them. Thank you very much.

From here on too, I will work hard to present you with even better work.

Looking forward to seeing you again, I end my afterword here.

Year 2005

With much thanks.
Keiichi Sigsawa

Translator's Notes

1. ↑ Literally, glasses-wearing girl.
2. ↑ The children's surnames are names of rifles.
3. ↑ *Watashi* is a Japanese pronoun for “I”, so is *boku*. However, *boku* is normally used by boys, while watashi can be used by anyone.
4. ↑ Continuation of Volume 6 Frontispiece: A Tale of a Tank —Life Goes On.—